



SIMON BLACK AT SEA

*The fateful maiden voyage of A.P.M. 1
Arion*



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CHAPTER ONE

A SHARP SWORD

PROJECT S.B. has been described in a number of ways—as a shadow factory in the Australian Alps, as a secret airfield, as a town without a name, and as the stamping ground of Wing Commander Simon Black and Squadron Leader Alan Grant. Each description is as accurate as the other. Each is right.

But it must not be imagined that Simon and Alan were the sole inhabitants. Far from it. It was a self-contained community, a very important unit in the structure of the British Commonwealth. From it, over the years, a large number of highly advanced rocket aircraft had flown out to form part of the defences of the Western nations. These aircraft had never fought a major battle and Simon Black, their designer, didn't want them to. He didn't build them to fight wars. Simon built them to prevent wars from starting.

The aircraft certainly had not preserved peace on their own, but they had helped. It was not the strong man who was attacked, but the weak. The strong man, as a rule, was able to live in peace. That was the law of the jungle and it was a very bad law, but it was the only law the world seemed to understand.

Simon had produced three distinct types of aircraft, each known as a Firefly, but each with a distinguishing number.

Firefly 1, the aircraft always closest to Simon's heart, was the original, the little interceptor capable of speeds above twelve hundred miles per hour. Firefly 2, which closely resembled an ordinary flying-boat, was a great monster which had never been built in quantity; and Firefly 3, a truly sensational machine, had also failed to reach quantity production. Firefly 3, the spaceship, was more of a museum piece than an aircraft. Its power was frightening, and the memories of the months that Simon and Alan had spent within it were among

their proudest memories, but their most harrowing ones. Man was not fully ready for space. They were convinced of that now. Man still may have dreamt of space and still worked on towards it and still darted into it and back again, but he had much to learn. Perhaps Firefly 3 could take them into space, but its power was brute force, violent and torturous to mind and body. Perhaps another method would be found some day that would make the conquest of space less painful.

They were the three known types, but a fourth had made its appearance. Firefly 4 was a reality, and Firefly 4 was the aircraft Simon had not wanted to build. He had argued bitterly against the orders of his government because Firefly 4 was a weapon of attack and not of defence. Simon could not see how it could possibly be used for anything but attack. He was proud of everything else he had created, but he was not proud of Firefly 4. He considered it was an ignoble blot on his honour as a man of peace. He hated the thing. It was a shadow on his conscience. In the mornings he would wake and think of it. In the evenings it was a heavy fear that denied him sleep until he was too weary to think any more.

Pop, of course, didn't see it that way. Pop thought Firefly 4 was a superb achievement. That a father and a son could regard the same aircraft from such different viewpoints may be thought a little odd, but Mr Black liked to rattle the sabre. A firebrand was Pop, a big man with a big voice, who, although he didn't want a war any more than Simon did, was convinced that a sharp sword was a better defence than a big shield, and that this extremely sharp sword that had been designed and built at Project S.B. was a feather in his cap. It never troubled his conscience for a minute.

Pop was administrative director of Project S.B. and was one of the big men in the aircraft industry. He had devoted his life to the conquest of the air and had known a few great moments in the past, but none greater than this. Firefly 4 was undoubtedly the most dangerous air weapon in existence.

It could travel as rapidly and as high as an intercontinental ballistic missile, deliver a dozen atomic weapons on a dozen

targets and return to base half the earth away in a few brief hours. Nothing could catch it. It was not just as good as a rocket; it was far more accurate and far cheaper, for it could be used again and again and again. One squadron of Firefly 4's could destroy any enemy in twenty-four hours.

Simon was sickened by this monster of his own imagination. He couldn't understand himself, couldn't forgive himself for allowing it to take shape on the drawing board; because once he had created the design, nothing could hold it back. It was out of his hands. The governments of the Western world were bigger than he was. When they said "Build", Firefly 4 had to be built. And it was built. It passed from a design on paper into the cold and stark metal of reality, so like the noble Firefly 3 in appearance, but so unlike it.

Firefly 3 was an instrument designed to explore the unknown depths of space, a splendid instrument for man's greatest adventure. Firefly 4 was a foul instrument designed to destroy half the earth.

The telephone rang in Pop's office and the male voice of his secretary said, "There's a call here for Wing Commander Black, sir. The caller is most persistent. What am I to do about it?"

How was Pop to know that the call was to be the beginning of one of the strangest experiences in the eventful life of his son? Pop couldn't foretell the future. He couldn't see into the vastness of the distant Pacific, or into that invisible web of mystery and tension and peril, or into the explosive danger which was to turn a day of his son's life into one of mortal combat with a giant run amok. Pop couldn't see any of that. He couldn't see beyond the annoyance of the present moment, for both the switchboard operator and his own secretary should have known how to handle the telephone call. Their orders were simple. The highly technical business of Simon's department was not the direct concern of Mr Black. There were other people in Simon's own department far better equipped to deal with it.

"You know what to do about it," growled Pop. "You know

my son is away on business and won't be back for a week or more. You have already been instructed to put all calls for Wing Commander Black through to the Design Office."

"But this is a personal call, sir."

"An even stronger reason, then, for not worrying me about it. My son's personal affairs are his own."

"I have explained that, sir, but the caller, if I may say so, became abusive. He said that if Wing Commander Black was away on business why hadn't he been informed."

"Oh," said Pop ominously, "and where's the call from? Some little back room in Canberra?"

"No, sir. From some place I've never heard of. Wyndamylong."

"Windamylong!" Pop sat up straight.

"Yes, sir. A Mr MacPherson."

Pop took a deep breath and bellowed. "Shut him off! Get rid of him, and quickly. That's one man I don't want to hear a word from. Tell him we've got smallpox. Tell him we're dead."

"Yes, sir."

Pop cracked the receiver down and what had started out to be a perfect day had suddenly gone wrong. A call from Mac spelt one thing—trouble. Mac was the plague of Pop's life, the one real thorn in his side. Mac was the busy little man, rarely seen, who pulled the strings far behind the scenes, and when Mac started pulling strings it was Simon who started dancing. And when Mac got his hands on Simon anything could happen.

The telephone rang again.

"I'm very sorry, sir, but I can't shake him off. He's not going to take no for an answer. He wants to speak to you."

"Does he? Well, I don't want to speak to him."

"I took the liberty, sir, of telling him that. I can only say that he was not impressed."

Pop boomed, "If you're going to place me at the mercy of every crackpot friend of my son's, I'm going to place you at the mercy of the labour market. You'll be looking for a new job."

Pop cracked the receiver down again and glared and started

drumming eight fingers and two thumbs along the edge of his desk. No. He did not want Mac. Mac could take himself and his precious secret service to the highest cliff on the Pacific coast and jump into the sea.

The telephone rang again and Pop groaned. He knew in his heart that there was no escape. Mac would keep on beating at him. Mac would break through sooner or later. One couldn't hold back the dawn merely because one wanted to sleep.

Pop sighed into his telephone, "Very well. Very well. Put him on."

"**GOOD MORNING, BLACK!**"

Pop winced and thumbed his ear. "You old bat," he grated. "Roar like that into my ear just once again and I'll sue you for breakage."

"I've stood enough of your nonsense, Black. I'm a busy man."

"So am I."

"I haven't all day to fool round with telephones. When I want to speak to you I expect to be able to do so."

"What you expect and what you'll get are two different things."

"Now, look here. I haven't called on your son for a whole year. I could have used him a dozen times; but no, I said to myself, I can't stand any more abuse from that old crook he calls a father. So I didn't use him; but this time I'm going to use him and the sooner you realize it the better. What's this tommy-rot about his being away on business? Put me on to him."

"He is away on business and if you want to argue the toss argue with the Minister. The directive didn't come from me. It came from Canberra."

"Really," snapped Mac. "I thought you were the boss."

"Even I am answerable to a higher authority. So are you. You can't have him. He's tied up."

"I'll tie you up if you don't tell me where he is. I'll submit a written report to the Prime Minister. This is the P.M.'s business, Black. Not mine. I'm only the go-between. Get me?"

Pop sighed. "Look, Mac. I know you have a job to do. But so have I and so has Simon and so has Alan. All's fair in love and war, I'll give you that, but I don't care who you bring into it, the Prime Minister or the American President. You can pull that rough stuff with other people, Mac, but you can't pull it with me. We're too much alike, old boy. We get what we want by the same methods—shock treatment. So you could have used Simon and Alan a dozen times during the past year, but you managed to get along without them. So you can get along without them again. It's not right that men so burdened by work in their own departments should be at the beck and call of your department. You'll make them old before their time. They don't even get time to live."

"I know, I know. Don't you think I feel it, too? They're sons to me almost as much as they're sons to you. No one knows better than I the sacrifices they've made. But where do I find them?"

Pop sighed again. It was becoming a habit. "With the R.A.A.F. Demonstrating and lecturing on Firefly 4. Mac, with them are observers from six other countries. They *are* tied up, Mac. They're up to the ears. A full evaluation of an aircraft such as Firefly 4 takes months, and I'm telling you, old boy, nothing you can bring up is more important than that."

"Oh."

"You do understand, Mac, don't you?"

"I understand that it might make it more difficult, but this is on the level. I'm not pulling the rough stuff. The Prime Minister wants Simon and Alan and he'll be satisfied with nothing less."

"It's unfair. It's grossly unfair. They haven't had a holiday for fifteen months. And what fresh devilry is it that you've hatched, anyway?"

"The *Arion*."

"No!" Pop was bellowing again before he knew it. "That *is* devilry. Not that monstrosity. What possible concern could it be of theirs?"

"They're to accompany it to sea."

"It'll kill them. You can't be serious."



"Deadly serious, and I'm afraid I must ask you not to communicate with Simon. He's not to know anything about it until I get to him."

"Absurd. Do you actually consider, Mac, that the *Arion* is more important than *Firefly 4*?"

"This has nothing to do with what I consider or with what I do not consider. The P.M. wants Simon and Alan for the *Arion*. She sails tomorrow."

"Heaven preserve us. . . . Sails tomorrow! Explodes tomorrow, you mean."

"Come on, Black. Where are they? If you don't tell me the air force will."

Pop groaned. "They're at Laverton, poor devils."

CHAPTER TWO

FIREFLY 4

R.A.A.F. Station, Laverton, lay twelve miles south-west of Melbourne. It was an air force base of some size and importance, but it was visible from the main highway which connected the capital with the big provincial city of Geelong.

Thousands of motorists passed Laverton daily, not in the remote distance but only a few yards from its perimeter track. Laverton had been set down on its wide acres years before the era of super-long-range bombers, years before the Australians had ever imagined that their geographical isolation would actually cease to exist. In those good old days it hadn't mattered where one built an air force station. It was all a bit of a joke anyway. Australia would never need to defend herself. The Royal Navy defended Australia half a world away. Aah, the paradise that was!

The brash Australians pioneered the airways of the world and cheered each advance, but never knew that every extra mile their heroes flew was another rock removed from their own defences. Miles were those rocks. Miles were the silent guns that defended Australia—thousands and thousands of miles—but the pioneering air age became the jet age, and the jet age the rocket age, and all those thousands of miles vanished. The Australians were no longer safely tucked down south underneath an enormous world, for suddenly the world had become very, very small.

Yes, R.A.A.F. Station, Laverton, was right on the main highway, pinpointed on every road map and chart, visible even to every train traveller who passed between the cities of Melbourne and Geelong. It was, if anything, a public thoroughfare where no secret could be hidden. The winds were often such that an aircraft taking off from the main runway had to pass close to the main highway or climb

directly over it while goggle-eyed road users were halted by a signal light.

On the other hand, if one wished to impress the public with the power or performance of a particular aircraft, Laverton was an admirable place to base it. It was for that reason that Firefly 4, although it ranked highest of the high on the secret list, was tested at Laverton. No matter how skilled any observer may have been, it would have been impossible for him to understand the true nature of the aircraft merely by looking at it or by watching its flight.

The Australian Government reasoned that any agent for a foreign or unfriendly power who chanced to see it would gain nothing from the experience except a rude shock. Firefly 4, they were sure, would do much more good by being seen than by remaining hidden. That was what they believed. They were certain that with Firefly 4 to deliver their weapons, no other country or group of countries would be insane enough to attack them. With this aircraft war had become so horrible that no more wars would be fought. Of course, men had been saying that sort of thing for centuries. They had even said it with the cross-bow.

Only one man had the courage to disagree with them and that was the man in whose mind the aircraft had been conceived and through whose hands the design had been committed to paper.

Mac knew that. Mac knew how Simon felt about it, but he was not at all sure that Simon was right. Mac had messed about with power politics and statesmen and military leaders for a long time and he knew how their minds worked. He knew that peace depended upon strength and it didn't matter very much what sort of strength; even the sort of strength that a man might hate.

Mac arrived at Laverton that morning by courier aircraft shortly before noon. It was a long flight from Mac's headquarters at Windamyalong and Mac had had plenty of time to think things over. As much as Mr Black annoyed him, he knew that Simon and Alan *were* busy, far too busy to be asked to serve in the aircraft industry and the so-called "secret

service" as well. One career was enough and, if Mr Black was to be believed, one career was almost too much.

Perhaps Mac would have dropped Simon and Alan entirely, refused to consider their services or to call on them, if he could have been sure that they didn't want to see him. But Mac couldn't bring himself to believe that. They always objected strongly to everything he demanded of them, always told him to lose himself or drown himself or get someone else to do his dirty work, but that was part of the game, or he thought it was.

In his heart, Mac was certain they enjoyed their special missions. He was certain the excitement and the danger he offered to them were the real stuff of their lives. He was certain of that because they had never failed him. Their capacity to survive incredible danger was remarkable. They were not tough guys, they were not bullies; but they had succeeded in Mac's service as no other men had succeeded. Admittedly, luck had gone with them at times, but that luck had always depended upon their courage, or upon their ability to think clearly, or upon their resistance to panic. As far as Mac was concerned Simon and Alan were the salt of the earth, and he would defend their lives and their reputations to his last breath. He was sure that if they sailed with *Arion* no actual harm would come to them. Unfortunately, Mac had only the vaguest conception of the strange shadow that darkened that extraordinary ship. It was an invisible shadow, but a very real one, a most mysterious force, which seemed to be part of the ship itself, yet sought to destroy the ship. It seemed that *Arion* was never really meant to be. Somewhere, something was most frightfully wrong. Mac didn't know what. He admitted that something was amiss, but he never came within sight of the truth.

Perhaps his promise to the Prime Minister that Simon and Alan would accompany *Arion* on her maiden voyage was a rash one, but it had been made. The P.M. had been most insistent, and Mac had given way against his better judgment. Actually, he liked *Arion* not one whit more than Simon's father. The Prime Minister was riding her to death, but he had to, because the fate of his government depended upon it.

Arion was the first completed vessel built to the specifications known as A.P.M. 1. She was designed by Dr Ross Chant for the Aura-Pulvinus-Maritimus Division of the Department of Supply. She was as revolutionary a vessel as man had conceived since the advent of the sail. Of her appearance, dimensions and performance very little was known. However, rumour had it that she had been constructed at the Walwyn Naval Dockyard greatly against the wishes of the Navy Board, and it was widely known that she would never have been built at all except for the determination of Federal Cabinet. Canberra was vitally interested in *Arion*. The vessel owed her existence to the foresight or the foolishness of the Prime Minister, and the P.M. had stated that if *Arion* failed he would give himself the sack. The *Arion* project was costing the Australian taxpayer more than twelve million pounds and that was a sum of money large enough to pay for the construction of four thousand family homes.

Squadron Leader Alan Grant was a navigator of the old school, and he had learnt his trade the hard way. It was not that he distrusted the modern wonder instruments that did everything for a navigator except blow his nose, it was simply that Alan preferred to know what was happening, preferred to find his own way, and preferred to enjoy the old-fashioned pleasure of arriving at his destination by his own skill.

He was convinced that these spoilt little boys of the 1960s who called themselves navigators would be hard-pressed to plot a homeward course out of a paper bag. That indeed was the essence of his argument in the crowded lecture room on that particular morning. The senior American observer had criticized the navigational equipment of Firefly 4 on the grounds that it was as up to the minute as a T-model Ford. It was ridiculous, said the American, that this particular aircraft, which was the most advanced heavy bomber on earth, should be fitted with only a few simple radio aids to navigation.

"My very good friend," said Alan, "I could take this aircraft to any point you care to name and bring it back to base."

"Yeah, *you* could. But who else?"

"She costs enough already, Colonel, this old girl, without cluttering her up with all sorts of useless bits and pieces. Every pound of weight has to be a pound of punch. You can do without your fancy instruments. You don't wear top hat and tails when it's dirty work you're out to do."

"I can't understand you guys. Aeroplanes aren't homing pigeons. They've got to have the right instruments to bring them back to roost."

"Colonel," said Alan, "she's not designed for peacetime flying. She's designed for Armageddon."

"So what?"

"So this. The upper atmosphere will be in such a mess that all your precious radio and radar instruments will go out like one busted light globe. We want navigators for this old girl, not button-pushers. The button-pushing brigade wouldn't last the first day, and if you're not going to last the first day you might as well dig your grave now, boy, and jump into it."

"Say, Wing Commander," said the American to Simon, "you designed this thing and I take my hat off to you, but you made one mistake. You picked the wrong man to advise you on the problems of navigation. Pushing one of these babies along at ten thousand miles an hour won't be like jogging from A to B in some propeller-driven crate."

"The particular navigator you are addressing," said Simon, "guided a space vehicle for sixty million on fewer instruments than you'll find in the Firefly 4. He did it, and didn't even raise a sweat."

"So I've heard. More fool him."

The door opened and the orderly officer saluted from the threshold. "A gentleman to see you, sir."

Simon frowned down from the rostrum. "I'm sorry, but the gentleman will have to go away."

"He's with the commanding officer, sir. They're waiting for you now. For Squadron Leader Grant as well."

Simon gestured at his audience—thirty air force officers from half a dozen nations. "You can see for yourself that

we're very busy. This is an important discussion and it will not be adjourned until 12 noon."

"It's already 12.15, sir."

Simon broke his chalk with an irritable snap of the fingers and reached for his hat. "Sorry, gentlemen. This makes us late for mess. See you back here at 1315 hours. . . . Righto, tell the C.O. we'll be along in a couple of minutes."

Simon joined Alan and they waited in silence until the lecture room emptied. "Visitor!" Simon said, snorting.

"That's what the man said."

Simon was disgusted. "They get more cunning every day. Now they fix it with the C.O. first. Just one more pat on the back for being a good boy will really finish me off."

"You *are* in a happy mood!"

"Every blessed day, Alan, brings more of these characters, grinning like Cheshire cats. Parliamentarians. Generals. Admirals."

"Come off it! You know you like it."

"Like it! They're driving me mad!"

Alan propelled his reluctant chief into the corridor. "The sooner we get it over, boy, the sooner we eat."

"Eat? I've even lost my appetite. For two pins I'd pack up and go bush."

"Sure, and pigs might fly!"

CHAPTER THREE

THE OLD BAT

THEY were conducted into the group captain's office and all the wind was taken from Simon's sails.

"Mac!" he shouted.

"Mac!" boomed Alan. "You old bat. How are you?"

"Well, am I glad to see you!" exclaimed Simon, laughing and pumping the old man's hand.

"Good old Mac!" roared Alan. "Long time no see."

"What have you been doing with yourself? Looks younger than ever, doesn't he, Alan?"

"I'll say. You'll have the girls after you, Mac. Well, I'll be blowed! Mac of all people."

"How's everything at Windamyalong? How's old Harry? Still cackling?"

"How's the garden? Did that walnut tree ever start growing?"

"What a sight for sore eyes! My sainted aunt, I never thought I'd be glad to see you!"

"SHUT UP THE PAIR OF YOU!"

"All right. No need to be rude."

"Miserable old so-and-so."

"What's wrong with you? Get out of the wrong side of the bed?"

"Lost a pound and found a penny?"

"Old bat."

"That's better," said Mac. "Now it's my own two boys. Hate I know, but love I do not know."

"Where's the group captain, Mac?"

"I've sent him to lunch."

"You've *sent* him?"

"Yes, indeed. He informs me he cannot abide coffee and toast in the middle of the day."

Simon's eyebrows went up. "Coffee and toast," he said

slowly. "Hey. . . . Now, you listen to me. Now, you hang onto your horses. Now, don't you pull that routine round here."

Mac bowed and indicated the group captain's desk with a wide sweep of his hand. Yes, three cups of coffee and a heap of hot-buttered toast—the omen, the food Mac always offered them when he was about to dispatch them to the ends of the earth or to destinations even more remote.

"But no," groaned Alan.

"But yes," said Mac. "If Mohammed can't come to the mountain, the mountain must come to Mohammed. The officers' mess very kindly obliged. They said that had they realized that Wing Commander Black and Squadron Leader Grant were so fond of coffee and toast they could have had it for lunch every day."

"You stinker."

"Now, look," growled Simon. "Let's get this straight from the start. We're only too delighted to see you. If we hadn't been so darned busy we would have been up your way long before this. But all work is out. Right out. Definitely no coffee-and-toast jobs. Those jobs are a thing of the past. They were all very well once upon a time. But we're big boys now. The R.A.A.F. has even promoted us. They've got their hands on us again and they're not going to let go. No, Mac. Good-bye, Mac. We're trying to handle too much already. I'm to be commanding officer of the first Firefly 4 squadron and even Pop doesn't know that yet. We'll be forming it soon. Good-bye. It's been nice meeting you."

"For heaven's sake!" wailed Mac. "Will you step off your soap-box and let a man get a word in edgeways? Sit down! Sit down and drink your coffee."

"No," said Simon.

"I would if I were you, because if you don't you won't be eating any lunch at all. By the time I've finished with you the mess will be shut."

"You'll never finish, old boy, because you're not going to start."

"Sit down!" roared Mac. "Or I'll poke you in the nose. And don't give me this nonsense about commanding a squad-

ron. Group Captain Willis has already informed me that you've flatly refused to accept, that you object strongly enough to building the aircraft and training others to fly it, without flying it operationally yourself."

"Oh."

"Yes! Now, sit down, both of you, before I lose my temper. I am a patient man but not as patient as you might suppose."

"See?" said Alan. "The old bat has done his block. Can't get his own way so starts stamping his foot."

"I am not stamping my foot."

"Oh yes, you are."

Mac mopped his brow. "I knew it. I knew this would happen. It always does. I should have stopped at home in my nice warm bed."

"That's right, Mac. With your knitting and your night-shirt."

"Gentlemen. . . ."

"Aha! Now he's crawling."

"Gentlemen. I am here at the Prime Minister's request. Might I say that, for the duration of this interview, I am the Prime Minister?"

"Poor old bloke. Delusions of grandeur."

"Senile, you know. Gets 'em all sooner or later."

"You know, Alan, from this angle I'd say he looks more like Field-Marshal Lord Montgomery."

"No-o-o. Napoleon."

Mac snorted like a horse. "Coffee and toast," he said deliberately, "is served. Will you please partake?"

"Sure, Mac."

"Of course."

"Anything you say."

"Your word is our command."

"SHUT UP! Don't you know when you've gone far enough?"

Alan shrugged. "What did I tell you? Done his block all right. Look at his nose. Clean out of joint."

"I give up," groaned Mac. "I truly do."

He sat down and started on the toast himself. "Cold," he

complained. "There you are. Argue, argue, argue, and the toast goes cold."

"We like cold toast, don't we, Simon? Nice and soggy, well chilled. Acquired the taste, didn't we, at Mac's place?"

Mac's mumbled grumble was too low-pitched to make sense, which was probably just as well, but he observed that at last Simon and Alan did sit down, did pick up their coffee and did start fooling with the toast. Mac decided that perhaps silence was his best weapon for the moment. The instant he opened his mouth the situation got away from him. So Simon and Alan, according to Pop, were overworked and stale. Pop didn't know the half of it. These two devils were right on top line. In fact, Mac could not remember any occasion when they had tongue-lashed him so effectively. Yes, Mac confessed to himself, he had come very close indeed to losing his temper. Perhaps that was a good sign. Perhaps it was. He had been upset to think that his boys had been showing signs of wear. They weren't wearing. They were fully wound.

Mac decided to come at it from a different angle. That decision, anyway, was forced upon him by the resolute silence adopted by Simon and Alan. The two of them smugly crunched toast, content to be silent while Mac was silent. Obviously, Mac could never put the situation to them until he started talking, and Simon and Alan were as fully aware of that as Mac was.

"Boys," he said. "The group captain knows what I want and he's not going to stand in my way. Of course, he couldn't, not really, not when my orders are the Prime Minister's orders."

"I understood," said Simon, "that the services were permitted to conduct their own business without interference from mere politicians."

"I hope you're not calling the Prime Minister a mere politician."

"Oh no. Not mere. A most considerable one."

"He's a good scout, Simon, and he has taken a lot of abuse."

"He'll be taking some from me, too, if you keep going."

Mac was beating his head against a wall. Then suddenly he saw the light. "The P.M. has heard that too much has been

asked of you of late. He values your services to the country so highly that he has instructed me to pack you off on a sea voyage. You're to take a rest, a holiday, dating from to-morrow."

Simon stared. "I beg your pardon?"

"The P.M. insists. You're to drop everything and go."

"Great Scott!"

"My sainted aunt!"

"Yes," said Mac benignly, sensing the first breakthrough, "to Honolulu."

"What's that? What's that?"

"The P.M. has been very worried about you boys."

"I didn't know he knew we were alive."

"Oh, Simon . . ." said Mac, in a brief moment of mockery. "But, seriously, he has been most concerned. Heard you were overworking. 'Mac,' he said to me, 'I look on those boys as sons.' "

Simon with outstretched hands and upraised eyes appealed to his guardian angel. "Not another father, please."



"'Mac,' the P.M. said to me, 'I'd like to see those boys of mine take a trip to Pearl Harbour.' "

"Hey," said Alan. "What's this about Pearl Harbour? You said Honolulu."

"What's the difference? Just around the corner. 'Yes, Mac,' the P.M. said, 'it's Pearl Harbour for my boys. A nice long sea voyage. Nothing to do but bake in the sun. *Arion* sails on Friday night. They're not to miss it.' That's what he said."

"*Arion*? You mean the *Orion*?"

"No," said Mac quietly. "I mean the—*Arion*."

"My sainted aunt!"

Simon stretched his long legs, raised an eyebrow as was his custom, ran a hand through his hair, and fixed a very steady gaze on Mac.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "Drop everything. A sea voyage. Tomorrow night. Pearl Harbour. The *Arion*."

"That's straight enough," said Mac.

"Now give me one good reason why the P.M. wishes to send us to our deaths in that monstrosity."

"Because that monstrosity is your idea."

Simon sat up and bellowed, "My idea!"

"Yes. You might recall a certain article you wrote that was published in the *Intelligence Monthly* of May 1953. You called it—'The Air Cushion'."

"I called it what?"

"You remember all right. I know it's a long time ago; but you remember. You discussed a discovery made during the war, by members of your own squadron. Something that you personally became aware of and that you personally used to help you on long flights at low level over the sea. The air cushion, Simon. Remember?"

Simon was stunned.

"Your idea," said Mac. "Well, perhaps not your personal discovery, but you did record it, didn't you? You drew the attention of scientists to the phenomenon, which was something that none of your fellow pilots did. You told them in that article that at about fifty feet or less above the sea the Sunderland flying-boat sometimes found a layer of air pressure upon which it could fly so securely that there was little or no emotional or physical strain on the pilot, despite the fact that he was perilously close to the sea. He could fly

almost with his hull in the water, yet he could fly in perfect safety. You did say that, Simon, didn't you? That sometimes, in some conditions, this safety cushion of air was a very real thing?"

Simon sighed. "Yes . . . yes. . . ."

"Good. So your article was discussed and other ex-flying-boat pilots were interviewed. They agreed with your statement, but the matter was dropped—or shall we say shelved?—for a few years, and didn't come up again until the history of one of our wartime Sunderland squadrons was published in 1956. This air cushion was mentioned again, and Dr Ross Chant, who had conducted the earlier investigations, decided to do something about it. He encouraged the Prime Minister to negotiate for a Sunderland to be flown down from Singapore. One most important discovery was made. This cushion was most apparent in warm conditions when the sea was calm. It could not be relied upon in windy weather or in cold weather. Therefore, while Dr Chant proved that the air cushion was real enough, he also proved that it was not of commercial value to anyone unless the conditions which were necessary for the cushion to establish itself could be created artificially."

"Not a particularly profound discovery, if I may say so."

"Perhaps not, Alan, but all great discoveries are simple. Don't let us imagine for a moment that this cushion is an invention. It's not an invention. Our generous Creator put it there for us to find. It's been there for millions of years just waiting for man to catch up with it and use it. Perhaps we haven't yet discovered how to use it for the best, but *Arion* is the first try."

"Now, Mac," said Simon reprovingly, "you know it's not. Saunders-Roe in England are way out in front with their Hovercraft. I distinctly remember they flew it first in June 1959, and with great success."

"You can't compare the Hovercraft with *Arion*."

"Why not?"

"We were building it before Saunders-Roe started."

"You might have been, but they beat you to the draw, old

boy. Hands down. *Arion* might be more ambitious, but it's not revolutionary. Not now."

"For Pete's sake!" growled Mac. "The Hovercraft is a totally different conception. *Arion* is a major military project. It's a different thing altogether. You could say that Firefly 4 and the Tiger Moth are both aeroplanes, but that's where the resemblance begins and ends. The Hovercraft weighs two tons, *Arion* is over twelve hundred tons. The Hovercraft carries a crew of two, *Arion* carries a crew of fifty. Only the basic principle is the same."

"All right. So *Arion* helps the cushion along by directing a blast of warmed air onto the surface of the sea!"

"Precisely, Simon. *Arion* is designed to ride on an air cushion which it creates for itself. It's not an aeroplane. No one builds an aeroplane weighing twelve hundred tons and no one bothers to build an aeroplane that cannot rise more than fifty feet above the surface. *Arion* is a ship all right. Chant has experimented with models, and they work, but he could not hope to gain real experience until he built a vessel large enough to put the theories into practice. He had to build a ship large enough to be of some practical use after the trials were completed, but not so large that there would be a major row if it failed, because these new projects cost money, and the more ambitious the project the more the money consumed, or that was the way they reasoned. The only way it could be done, the only way the money could be found, was to call it a defence project. We've always been able to dig up plenty of money for defence. Therefore they decided to build an experimental warship of twelve hundred tons. They did not realize how the cost was going to spiral. It has since become apparent that they could have doubled or trebled the size of the vessel and spent very little more money. As always, it has not been the cost of the materials, but the cost of tooling up, of wastage, and of paying for time and labour. *Arion*'s been three years and nine months in the building. New processes had to be evolved. Some things didn't work out and had to be redesigned. Some things had to be scrapped entirely. It has been a chapter of misfortune almost from the beginning. You know as well as I do that its

construction has been plagued by accidents. Four workmen have been killed, dozens have been injured. Only three months ago an explosion below deck caused extensive damage and put six men into hospital. We were very lucky it was not a total loss. *Arion* has become a jinx. Men are afraid of it and, worse than that, men have made a bad joke of it. It's known as *The Monstrosity*. You called it that yourself."

"Yes, but I hope you're not blaming me for it."

"I'm not blaming you for anything. I am merely drawing your attention to the fact that you do have a slight personal interest in it."

Simon grunted in disgust.

"Boys," Mac said, "we believe that *Arion* is not a jinx. We believe that it is a most admirable ship, which opens up to us a new conception of speed and honest-to-goodness hitting power. It's a warship that's unsinkable, three times as fast as any conventional vessel afloat. It can rapidly outdistance any gun or rapidly close for attack. It can't be torpedoed, except when it is at rest or in harbour, and it is armed with a variety of weapons that make conventional attack from the air against it almost impossible. *Arion* is not a jinx. There is no fundamental weakness in the design of a ship merely because it has become a target for acts of sabotage."

"Sabotage! Nonsense, Mac! That's the easy way out."

"Make no mistake about it, Simon. It's a mysterious and terrifying form of sabotage that has attacked this ship from a dozen different angles. That explosion came from a fuel tank, and how a fuel tank can explode in a stationary vessel, don't ask me. Most of the accidents have been caused by peculiar structural failures that have baffled even the designer. Again and again the specifications have been altered by some unknown person or persons in such an ingenious way that the error has never been found until too late."

"Boy!" Simon whistled. "What a flight of fancy that is! That's ridiculous."

"It's the solemn truth. There's something desperately wrong in the A.P.M. Division. The Minister for Supply, who, after all, is responsible for the division, is very, very worried. There have been almost as many guards on the dockyard as

workmen. Every man concerned has been screened—with the utmost discretion, of course—until I am prepared to swear that no one, within half a mile of it, would dream of harming it. I tell you, it's beaten us."

"In other words you've proved that it's not sabotage. That it is a jinx. These things do happen, Mac."

"My dear boy, we've proved no such thing. I am aware that an accident is an accident, but a ship can't destroy itself. It has to be helped along by a human hand. But it's beaten us. We admit that. Beaten us to such an extent that Dr Chant is a broken man, convinced that his brainchild is a monster."

"He should know. It probably is. I'm convinced that Firefly 4 is a monster."

"Firefly 4, Simon, hasn't harmed a hair of a single head."

"Oh, Mac."

"It hasn't. No matter what you think, Firefly 4 will never be a killer until some man makes it so. Chant's problem is not your problem. He believes that he has created a monster and he feels to blame for the lives of the men who have died and for the appalling waste of public money. He wants the government to scrap it, to cut its losses, to condemn it now, before it becomes the centre of a major disaster. Chant is certain that if it sails, it must fail disastrously, and I believe he's trying to save the government by accepting the blame himself. The man's sanity is going. He's developed such a guilt complex that he's almost in the humour to accept the blame for the cares of the world. That's why the Prime Minister has ordered *Arion* to sea. He believes in it so much that he is sure a successful maiden voyage will put a stop to rumour and prevent Dr Chant from driving himself out of his mind. Scientists of his calibre, Simon, don't grow on trees. He's worth more to this country than the *Arion* is, or ever will be. The tragedy is this, and it's a tragedy that no one seems to have realized. Even the cleverest of men have their blind-spots. They become obsessed with an idea or an ideal and forget that the world still rolls on. *Arion will be out of date* before it can enter service."

"Because of the flying saucer?"

"No. I thought I had made it plain to you."

"So you leave us with an extraordinary statement, Mac. In one breath you tell us it's the fastest ship afloat; in the next you tell us it's out of date."

"All warships are out of date no matter how advanced they are. You've seen to that. From an article written by you came the idea which led to the construction of the *Arion* and to the expenditure of twelve million pounds. While the government has been building it, Simon, and while some devilish enemy has been trying to prevent it from being built—"

"Mac, an enemy is not devilish merely because he opposes you. That's something that I've discovered all along the line."

"Don't change the subject. I'm telling you that while the government has been building it, despite all obstacles, natural or unnatural, you've produced the Firefly 4, the aircraft which in squadron strength can win a war by itself. So what's the use of warships? They're out of date."

"You *are* trying to blame me."

Mac clenched his fists and looked up to high heaven. "These boys who think they're guilty men! Don't be difficult! I'm merely giving you a couple of good reasons why you should go along with *Arion* tomorrow night, quite apart from the fact that you've been ordered to go."

"Thank you."

Mac sighed and glanced at Alan.

"Where do we really fit in, Mac? You haven't told us, you know."

"You'll have nothing to do, understand, except sit, meditate, and keep your eyes open. You'll have nothing to do because nothing's going to happen. You're not members of the crew, so don't imagine that you will be. The navy, the army, the air force and the Department of Supply have each been asked to send an official observer, but we're stretching the point as far as the air force is concerned and permitting two observers, namely yourselves. That provides you with the reason for being there. You will be required to make a report on its performance, but your main duty is to get *Arion* safely into Pearl Harbour, come wind or weather, storm or foe."

"For pity's sake," growled Simon, "what do you mean,

Mac? You tell us we have nothing to do because nothing's going to happen. You tell us we're not members of the crew and that our job is to keep our eyes open. Then you tell us we've got to get *Arion* into Pearl Harbour come what may."

Mac sighed. "I don't know what I mean."

"That's obvious."

"Let me try again. . . . I don't believe the ship's a jinx. I do believe it's been sabotaged and that it might be sabotaged again. I believe something is wrong in the A.P.M. Division and it's a source of grave concern. The division itself hasn't really helped us. There's a barrier somewhere and we can't get past it. That's why the P.M. wants you. He's giving you full power and here are your orders."

Mac opened his briefcase and took from it a slim envelope. "This will tell you everything, but you are not, I repeat *not*, to open it until you sail. I don't want you to play it tough, but you must play it positively. If you need not exert your authority don't exert it, but it is there to be used. Too much is at stake. The P.M. admits that we've played it too gently. This is the time for action. Do I make myself clear?"

"As clear as mud. You've done nothing but argue with yourself from the moment you got here."

Mac grunted. "I'm giving you a free hand. That's what I mean and you know that I mean it. We believe that you'll succeed where others have failed. You have prestige. You're widely respected. There is some opposition in the division at high level to your going along on the maiden voyage—"

"High-level opposition! How high?"

"The director and a couple of his offsiders. But nothing has been committed to paper. It's been discussed at top-level conferences, but we're confident that once you make yourselves known to them it will all fizzle out. This shadow over *Arion* must be dispelled. It's a splendid ship, a wonderful conception, beautifully built. I'm telling you it can't fail. The only thing that can stop it is sabotage. Your presence will make the saboteur very cautious, or reckless, and when a man becomes over-cautious or reckless he begins to become conspicuous."

"And now you're arguing with yourself again."

"And how's that?"

"You told us that everyone within half a mile of *Arion* was a solid citizen. Now you're telling us that the saboteur will be aboard."

"Will you stop tangling me up! I can swear for every person involved, but one or more of those persons *has* committed sabotage; or there never would have been any sabotage. Something is very wrong indeed. You must realize that, or the P.M. would never have asked for you. We're pitted against something of very great cunning. Something's there!"

"So now we're looking for ghosts?"

Mac shrugged. "I refuse to believe this talk of a jinx. There's no such animal. *Arion* must get to Pearl Harbour and back again. It's passed far beyond the routine proving of a new ship. This exercise has become a very personal matter to a lot of people. One could say that upon it depends the fate of a government and the sanity of the ship's designer."

"Huh," grunted Alan. "Which comes first? The well-being of the designer or the pay packets of the politicians?"

"They're unkind words, Alan."

Alan grimaced. "I suppose they are. I'm sorry."

Simon started pacing a track back and forth across the carpet. Mac and Alan watched him in silence until he had straightened out his thoughts. "Righto," he said. "I can see the picture, confused as it is. I see that you don't know what you're up against, that you've given us a job to do, but you can't tell us what sort of a job. We don't know whether we're looking for a ghost or a man or a number of men or a jinx or nothing."

Mac nodded glumly.

"Okay. I can see all that, but I still fail to see why someone else cannot do it. We're not the only men of action, not the only aeronautical designers in the country. Why does it have to be us? Your coming here in this manner also upsets thirty other officers who have flown in from many parts of the world."

"They're not going to argue, Simon. I've yet to meet the airman, no matter how exalted his rank, who will knock back

the chance of a week's leave in a foreign country. We take Melbourne for granted, but they don't. For them it's probably quite an exciting place."

"My sainted aunt!" said Alan.

"So you reckon the voyage will take a week?"

"At the outside, Simon. Four thousand five hundred miles there and four thousand five hundred miles back. Total travelling time, at about one hundred miles an hour, four days. You'll be resting over at Pearl Harbour for a day and a half. Yes, you'll be back with twenty-four hours to spare."

"But why not someone else?"

"You exasperate me, Simon! If you walked into a restaurant and ordered steak and eggs would you be likely to accept a toffee on a stick?"

Simon was not sure that he appreciated the joy that greeted his announcement to his distinguished class that they were granted seven days of freedom. Melbourne must have had something to commend it. Those thirty officers were racing for their cars before Simon and Alan had found the time to draw a couple of service revolvers from the Equipment Section. It was sobering. Simon had always believed himself to be a lecturer of some slight talent.

"Alan," he said sadly, "am I that much of a bore?"

Alan shrugged. "You do have your flat moments, old boy, but I didn't think you were that bad."

It was depressing, and Simon had another worry on his mind. "What are we doing about Rex?"

"Nothing, I suppose. He's back home."

"I don't fancy taking off on a job without him."

Neither did Alan. That faithful dog, Rex, was a member of the team and had been for a long time. Rex was one of their superstitions. They didn't like making a move into danger without him.

"We've got to get him aboard."

"How?"

"We should have tackled old Mac before he got away. I've never seen him vanish so fast."

"He would have said no, anyway."

"Yeah."

"You know, Simon, I've got a funny feeling about this job. I reckon old Mac's double-crossed us."

"You feel that way, too, do you?"

"I certainly do."

"Something doesn't add up. Why bring us into it when it's strictly a security job? Hang it all, we're not military police. If we start nosing round that ship we'll be as popular as rattlesnakes. Being an observer is one thing, but being a snooper is another."

"You agree then," said Alan slowly, "that as unpopular passengers we'll have no right to take a dog aboard?"

"No. No, I don't. If they don't like it they can lump it. We'll send Pop a telegram and he can arrange for Rex to be brought here. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Good," said Simon. "Now, with what's left of today we can do a spot of scouting. I'd like to know more about *Arion* before I set foot on her. Yes, sir, and about the people who will be sailing her."

CHAPTER FOUR

DOOMED MEN

SIMON's first call was at the Aeronautical Research Laboratories of the Department of Supply near Melbourne. A colleague of theirs, Don Chandler, was the man they sought. They dragged him away from his beloved wind tunnel and propelled him, protesting, to his private office and sat him down at his desk.

"Now," said Simon, "I'm interested in the *Arion*. What do you know about it?"

Chandler twisted his mouth, scratched his chin, and frowned. The result was quite extraordinary.

"I see," he said. "Well, perhaps I can afford you a little time. Take a seat."

They faced him across the wide desk.

"Cigarette?" said Chandler. "No, don't use them, do you? *Arion*, eh? So they got you after all?"

"Got us?" Simon had not known what fruit this interview would bear, but that it could begin in such a manner was a shock indeed.

"I'd heard," said Chandler, "that they were going to approach you."

"Let me get this straight," said Simon. "You heard—what?"

"The initial recommendation that you should be asked to accompany *Arion* on her maiden voyage came from this department."

"From here?"

"Not from me personally. From the Minister, I believe, more or less against the wishes of everyone else concerned. I know it's been discussed on several occasions over the past months. In fact, I sat in on one such discussion."

"It's the first I've heard of it," growled Simon. "Mac told us there was some opposition but it was confidential and only at the top. Are you sure?"

"I'm not given to imagining things, old chap. The team was very strongly against it. That's the price you pay for brilliance. Half the world loves you and the other half hates you, and, brother, how they hate you."

"Tell us more," said Alan quietly, "because we understood that this mission, from our point of view, was strictly secret."

Chandler frowned. "I suppose it was secret within the department, but it was pretty widely known. Secret? No, no, I wouldn't say it was. If you didn't live so far away you might have heard about it yourself."

Simon reflected soberly. "It's not like Mac to start us off on the wrong foot. A quiet little double-cross is in order, I suppose. If we always knew to the last detail what we were up against we'd never want to start any job. But Mac told us it was confidential; then we walk in here and you know all about it and you're not even a member of the A.P.M. Division."

"I've helped them, Simon."

"But so have a lot of other people, I should imagine."

Chandler nodded. "*Arion* has turned out to be a bit of a headache."

"You can say that again," said Alan.

"Speaking for myself," said Chandler thoughtfully, "I can't understand why. It showed great promise. I tested a model, right here, in the wind tunnel, and I can only say I was impressed. There were a few problems, but we ironed them out. When I passed her on she was very sound aerodynamically. She had to be good; not that she was expected to exceed forty knots in the water or one hundred knots in the air, but her power-weight ratio was loaded against her, and she couldn't afford to waste power overcoming drag."

"You're getting away from us," said Simon firmly. "We're starting from the ground floor. We don't know anything. You said she'd become a headache?"

"Very true. She's certainly been built to look as she should have looked, but, bless me, Simon, she's nose-heavy. You've only to look at her, but everyone tells me I'm mad. They tell me she was meant to sit nose-down in the water, but she

wasn't nose-heavy when she left me. Something's happened. After all, a flying-boat is a flying-boat, and call *Arion* what you will that's what she is, and nose-down is a very dangerous attitude. If anyone should know the truth of that you should. *Arion* can get away with it at rest, but what's going to happen at forty or fifty knots? What's going to happen at one hundred knots?"

"I'm following you," said Simon, "but I told you that we were coming into this from rock bottom. You're still too far ahead of us. I want to know where we stand and why you recommended that we should accompany her."

"You've got the wrong end of the stick, there, old chap. I'm one of the boys who said you shouldn't be asked, but for different reasons from the rest of them. If you value your life, brother, don't you touch that monstrosity with a forty-foot pole. She's jinxed. She's a killer. She's had the shadow of the devil over her from the day they laid the keel. I've a file of letters in that cabinet an inch thick. I've protested until I'm black in the face. They won't listen to me, and what's more they won't listen to Ross Chant either. He wants to scrap her. Did you know that? The designer actually wants to scrap her."

"Yes," sighed Simon, "we'd heard, but you still haven't explained where we come into it."

Chandler's expressive face was an education to behold. "You two. You're lucky people. I've heard it said that the Arabs have a name for you—'They upon whom Allah smiles'."

"My sainted aunt!" said Alan.

Chandler banged a fist on the desk. "You *are* lucky. The gods *do* smile on you. You're the indestructibles. Take a look at your own histories. You should have been buried ten years ago. That's what the Minister's banking on. Can't you see? They all know darned well the ship is a botch, but there's twelve million in cold cash tied up in it and they're going to justify the expenditure of that money if it kills them. The Minister reasons if you're on it, it'll come through."

Simon crammed his hat on his head and jerked his arm at Alan. "Let's get out of here."

"Why?" barked Chandler. "What's eating you?"

"You and your nonsense. That's what's eating me. I never expected to hear eyewash from you, Don Chandler."

Chandler angrily stubbed his cigarette. "I don't want a fight with you, Simon; we've worked together on too many things for too long. But I've already told you what I think. Don't touch it, not with a forty-foot pole. I tell you, brother, the crew of *Arion* are doomed men. As soon as they hit the open sea, as soon as they give her the herbs, they're gone; and neither your luck nor any other power in heaven or earth will stop it. Do me a favour will you? Do me one favour."

"What?"

"Spend an hour going over the plans and spend another hour reading my letters to the director. Brother, they'll open your eyes."

"You've got the plans?"

"I can have them in fifteen minutes. What do you say?"

Simon sighed heavily. "Okay. But it's proof we'll be looking for, not phantoms."

Chandler glared but reached for his telephone. "Switch," he said, "I want to speak to Mr Scott of the A.P.M. Division. I believe he's in conference, but tell him it's urgent." Chandler exhaled deeply and turned to Simon. "You know Scotty?"

"Never heard of him."

"He's a good enough bloke, but he's stone blind where *Arion* is concerned. That's the mistake they've made. They've got a lot of theoretical scientists on the project—no strictly practical men. Not one experienced flying-boat pilot. They should have called you in on it years ago. They reckon they've got all the answers. They reckon they know everything, but they forget the lessons of history. They get excited about their successes but forget their failures. . . . Scotty! Is that you, Scotty? . . . Yeah, I know you're in conference, but I want a complete set of plans for *Arion* at the double and maybe you'd better forget your conference and bring them down yourself. Be a good chap. I have a couple of parties here who are vitally interested—Wing Commander Black and Squadron Leader Grant. . . . What's that?"

They saw the hardening of Chandler's mouth. "Yes, I have

told them and I don't care what you think. . . . Now, look here, I want those plans!"

After a while Chandler replaced the receiver in its cradle and met Simon's eyes. "No dice," he said quietly. "Scotty says if you insist upon seeing the plans you're to report to him at the main city office. Did you want to go up to the city?"

"We were going there anyway. Is that all he said?"

"Yeah."

"It wasn't, Don. He said more than that."

"Yeah . . . yeah, he did."

"What?"

"If you must know, he said that Mr Black's inquiries were regrettable and that if Mr Black started throwing his weight around Mr Black would be sat upon. Mr Black was honoured to be an observer aboard the *Arion*, but that honour did not bestow further privileges upon him. Now you know. Now you know."

Alan started locking his fingers together, tightly, and unlocking them.

"So," said Simon. "So that's the way the land lies. That's what he really said? The gospel truth?"

"So help me."

"Very well. I think, Alan, that we shall pay a little call upon Mr Scott. Coming?"

"Try to stop me."

"Before you go, Simon. Those letters of mine. You really must see them."

"Yes . . . your letters. I don't know that we've got the time now; not the way things are shaping. Make a précis, will you? Give us what you consider to be your most important objections and have them delivered by hand to Laverton by midnight tonight. Can you do that?"

"Sure thing."

"Thanks," said Simon, "for everything. Sorry about our little misunderstanding."

"I'm not. Not if it saves your lives."

The long blue-grey staff car moved into the dense traffic of

the city and Simon and Alan took their ease in the deep comfort of the rear seat.

"Where there's smoke there's fire, Simon. I've never seen Don so steamed up about anything."

That was a fact. Chandler's behaviour had startled Simon. "True enough," he admitted, "but I still think it's the clash of personalities, Alan. Jealousies. Arguments between departmental divisions. We've struck the same sort of thing at Project S.B. Human nature. Even the best of men break down sometimes. When they're worried or excited or over-worked they say silly things. We've been guilty of it ourselves."

Simon did feel that, but the fact remained that Don Chandler wasn't a fool. He was a very sound man and Simon had always respected his judgments and opinions, but it seemed that where *Arion* was concerned perfectly sane men began to behave in an odd manner. Of course, *Arion* was revolutionary, and men were bound to praise her or condemn her with spirit, but surely in this case the men involved were going too far. The behaviour of the designer, the person who should have been the most enthusiastic, was peculiar, to say the least of it. Indeed, as Alan had observed, where there was smoke there was fire.

When they entered the Commonwealth buildings they quickly learned that "Scotty" was a person to be reckoned with. He was the director of Aura-Pulvinus-Maritimus—the boss. He had plenty of equals in the Department of Supply, but only one real superior, and that was the Minister.

Simon and Alan accompanied the escorting peace officer up to the tenth floor and followed him down a long, straight and silent corridor towards a large and heavy door, which bore the legend in gold letters "Conference Room".

"Looks like we're going to meet the whole team."

Alan's hand touched Simon's arm and he spoke in an undertone. "Take it easy, skipper. Let them have their say. Don's view is his own view. Let's hear the other side."

"Of course."

"Well, better get that grim look off your face."

The peace officer entered and the door closed and Simon and Alan were left on the outside.

"You take it easy, too, Alan. Your red-headed temper's always getting you into trouble."

"Sure; but this is not a case of temper, it's a case of dignity, and that's your weak spot, boy. You sit on your dig. too much."

Simon raised an eyebrow. "And what's wrong with you? What are you getting nasty about?"

"There you are! You just can't help yourself."

Simon was not given the opportunity to consider the point of Alan's remark. The door opened and the peace officer beckoned them in. "If you'll wait here, sir," he said to Simon, "they'll see you in a minute or two."

"Thanks."

They were alone again in an air-conditioned cloakroom, adorned with a long seat, a mirror, a washbasin, and hats and coats of various shapes and sizes, some civilian, some naval. The room was without windows, sound-proofed, and their entry to the conference chamber beyond was barred by a heavy felt-padded door.

"Very hush-hush."

"Yes."

"You know, Alan, I'm beginning to think Don was right."

"Why?"

"Instinct. I feel like an intruder."

"Well, keep your opinions to yourself. We're too close to the target, skipper."

The door to the main chamber opened and a very tall, very fat, very florid man waddled into their presence, and he allowed the door to hiss shut behind him. Neither Simon nor Alan glimpsed more than a detail of what lay behind.

"Wing Commander Black," the large gentleman wheezed, "and Squadron Leader Grant?"

"Yes," said Simon.

"I'm Scott. I understand you wish to inspect the plans of *Arion*."

No handshake. The omission of that courtesy was very obvious.

"Yes," said Simon. "We do."

"I expect you realize that your request is highly irregular?"

"No," said Simon, endeavouring to control a sudden flare of anger. "I don't realize it at all. I think it's a very fair demand, and I might add also that I do not consider a cloak-room a proper place to discuss anything."

"As far as we're concerned," said Scott, "you're an observer, not an investigator. The generous invitation extended to you to travel aboard *Arion*, in response to your own request, does not give you any privileges—at all."

It was Alan who jumped in then, not Simon. "You're ill-mannered and you're a liar, Mr Scott. Let's get out of here, Simon, before I punch him in the jaw."

Simon snapped at both of them. "Be quiet! And you, Mr Scott, there are one or two facts that you've got to get straight. You're not going to drive me away from here by rudeness or by any other method until I see what I came to see. We have our orders and we intend to obey them. We did not ask to go aboard *Arion*; we were ordered aboard—and by a far higher authority than yourself. The plans, please. I want them now."

Scott, purple with rage, exploded. "Get out of here before I call the guards!"

"You call the guards," retorted Alan, "and see where it gets you!"

Alan shot out a hand and grasped Scott by the lapels of his coat and jerked. Scott's head jolted back in astonishment and Alan pushed with all his strength. The huge man stumbled backwards and landed in a sitting position on the hard wooden seat along the wall.

"Yes, Mr Scott," Alan rasped, "you've gone too far."

"Alan."

"Okay, Skipper, dignity is dignity, but insults are insults and this big galah had better realize it or next time I'll dump him so hard he'll drop clean through ten floors to the basement. . . . Right, Mr Scott. On your feet."

Scott was breathing heavily and his florid complexion had become pale. "That was not at all wise," he stammered.

"On your feet, Scotty, or I'll thump you again."

"All right, Alan," said Simon. "We don't want to hurt Mr Scott. But you do see, Mr Scott, don't you, that we're not in the humour for nonsense? I regret this incident very much. In all the years that we have been associated with the Service, I cannot remember anything like it. It's very sad, sir, but I do intend to see these plans, and what's more I intend to join the discussion inside. I want to know what form of skullduggery is going on round here. And may I remind you that we are special agents of the Commonwealth? We do have powers, sir, of our own, and we're invoking them. You will open that door and introduce us in a civil manner to your colleagues at the conference table."

CHAPTER FIVE

S H O C K !

THE big man lurched to his feet, grunting.

"I'll be hanged if I will," he muttered with a scowl.

"I must remind you," said Simon, "that we are not speaking to you as observers. We are speaking to you as Federal agents. As I remarked a few moments ago, I regret every phase of this incident, but tomorrow night fifty men put to sea in the *Arion* and their lives are our responsibility."

"Their lives are perfectly safe."

"Are they? I doubt it, Mr Scott. I have reason to believe that A.P.M. i *Arion* is an unstable vehicle and that a lot of people round here are trying to convince themselves that it's not. Why? I don't know, but I intend to find out. You will introduce us, please, to your colleagues."

"I'm warning you, Wing Commander, that I don't like your attitude and neither will my men."

"We'll take our chance on that."

Scott had recovered from his fright and was again prepared to argue to the last ditch. "We don't like snoopers in our division."

"And I wouldn't like them in my division either. The point is, had you kept your affairs in order there would not have been any snoopers—"

"Scotty," growled Alan, "I feel my temper fraying again."

"Remember this," continued Scott. "My division has been persecuted for years. We've had to take derision and abuse from the Press and the public and from Parliament and even from fellow officers of our own department. It has welded us into a team and we've taken just about all that we can stand. That's part of my team in there, and I'm their spokesman and I will not permit you to bully them."

"We have not been rough without cause," said Simon quietly. "You were particularly rude to us this afternoon even before we got here, and I have noticed no subsequent

improvement in your behaviour. The door, please. The door, Mr Scott, or you'll regret it until the day you die."

Scott opened the door with a scowl and they went in.

That very little indeed had been discussed during Scott's absence was at once obvious. Of the dozen or so men standing at that long table only two or three seemed to be at ease. Most of them regarded the approach of Simon and Alan with unmistakable hostility. That they had risen to their feet was the only hopeful sign.

"Gentlemen," said Scott, with pained politeness, "Wing Commander Black on my right and Squadron Leader Grant on my left. They are anxious to meet you all. . . . First, may I present Commander Frank Luff, R.A.N. skipper of *Arion*?"

Simon made a snap judgment. Luff's was a good, clean Anglo-Saxon face, even a handsome face, revealing, Simon believed, all the indications of character; but when Simon extended his hand, Luff ignored it. Simon turned his palm uppermost and squinted at it and dropped it to his side.

"Lieutenant-Commander Wesley, R.A.N., second in command. . . ."

Another cool nod and even Alan's ever-ready smile withered away.

"Mr Colin Skinner, navigator . . . Mr Dawson, engineer . . . Mr Edgar, second engineer . . . Lieutenant Gaffney, R.A.N., wireless. . . ."

Still the unfriendly progression round the table.

"Dr Huxley, medical officer . . . Mr Tollis, radar, and Mr Upton, electrical installations. And, from my own staff, Mr Clinton, Mr York, Mr Street, Mr Johns and Mr Williams. Thank you, gentlemen. You may be seated."

Simon looked then, as they resumed their places, from face to face. He noted as Alan noted, that there was no move to go for additional chairs, no attempt to close up to make room for them at the table, no relaxation of their cool hostility.

Simon stood his ground, endeavouring to control his anger, waiting until he could trust himself to speak with a level voice. When he did speak he was astonished by his own smoothness.

"We're honoured," he said, "to greet you all here. Our host did not inform us that we were to meet *Arion's* officers, or some of them anyway. I wish he had, but to eliminate any chance of misunderstanding let me make our position clear. We're not against you at all; we're battling for you no matter how vehemently you or your friends may try to prevent us. You might say you didn't want us, but while we're being so brutally honest let me say that we didn't want you either. You've got your orders, we've got our orders, and I'm afraid they bring us together. We had hoped that our duties would have been simple enough to have been pleasant, but it has already been made abundantly clear to us that you do not like us and do not intend to like us and we're not thick-skinned enough to enjoy it."

Simon paused then, for he felt that Commander Luff was ready to jump, but the moment passed and nothing was said. What could they say? It was the truth. They listened in stony silence, but at least they gave him a hearing.

"To continue," said Simon, "I remarked a few moments ago to Mr Scott that in all the years we have been in the service of our government we have never encountered downright rudeness until this afternoon. We started out in reasonably good humour. We were not overjoyed, I'll give you that, because we were compelled to drop our own work and we believe that to be every bit as important as your work. But we didn't start out with a chip on our shoulders, because we're accustomed to receiving orders at short notice. We knew nothing of this assignment until 1225 hours today. Anything you have heard to the contrary is a lie. No matter from whom you have heard it, it's a lie. We mightn't like our orders, but we make the best of them, and it's not going to hurt you chaps to get the same slant on things. I don't know what's got into you. You're probably a perfectly decent bunch of blokes, but you're not acting like it, and you've got us a bit on the raw. I'm telling you that the time can come when we'll use force if we consider force is justified. We're not in this to get our faces slapped. If there's any slapping to be done, we'll do it. We're going to obey our orders if we have to break you in the process. Do I make myself clear?"

Luff met him squarely in the eyes. "Is that a question?"

"It's a statement," said Simon. "Not a question."

"Am I permitted to speak?"

"It's a free country."

Luff pushed his chair back and walked slowly round the length of the table, until he faced Simon, two paces short of him. Luff was a fine figure of a man and he was angry and his fists were clenched. "You've said some strange things, Wing Commander, and some very hard things, and I don't like the way you've expressed them."

"I'm sorry if they offend you, but I retract nothing."

Luff might have been puzzled. It was hard to say.

"You've called a good friend of mine a liar, Black. Now I know your reputation and I would have liked to have judged you on your reputation, but I can't. I can only judge you as I find you and I'm not impressed. You have apparently forced a passage into this conference room on the eve of our sailing, insulting us all, distracting us from the important task ahead, for some purpose known only to yourselves. I'm the captain of my ship and if I forbid you to set foot on her, you won't set foot on her."

Simon sighed. "Look here, this is getting worse. We've got to draw the line somewhere. We've got to start behaving like men instead of delinquents. The last thing we came looking for was a fight, but this war of nerves was declared on us. We didn't start it and didn't expect it, but I'm going to get to the bottom of it. As far as you're concerned we're meddling busybodies. Is that right?"

"You couldn't have expressed it better."

"We're conceited, full of our own importance, arrogant, butting in where we're not wanted or needed or welcome."

"That is an admirable summing up."

"Very well." Simon turned to address Scott. "Don't you think that the time has come to put the record straight, Mr Scott; that whatever you said to these men before we entered the room should be unsaid? We're prepared to let bygones be bygones, but the next move is yours. There's an untruth here somewhere and it's got to be squashed."

Scott's reply cracked back. "I have nothing to add. I have

been called a liar and I resent it. I warned you I would not permit you to bully my men. Even if I have to stop you by force, personally, you will not go aboard *Arion*. You might be a national hero, but you're not a hero here, Mr Black. We can see you for what you are."

Simon turned on his heel full into the trembling and outraged person of Alan. "Let's go. Let's breathe some clean, fresh air."

"I'll—I'll break his rotten neck."

"No you won't. Let's go."



Alan's voice was a fierce whisper. "You can't let 'em do it to you, Skipper."

"They've done it. Let's go."

Alan went with Simon, out through the cloakroom, back along the corridor, down in the lift, and out into the clean, fresh air.

They didn't observe the bearded gentleman who watched them go.

CHAPTER SIX

THE MYSTERY

THEY stood at the corner of the street and pondered the next move.

"We're not getting anywhere, Alan."

"I differ. We're progressing backwards at an ever-increasing rate. . . . It's not often that I can't believe my ears, but did that really happen?"

"It's a bad dream—you know, Alan, when everything's against you. When you try to climb a hill that grows steeper and steeper. When you try to run away but can't move. When you reach out to take a friend's hand and it becomes a serpent. You wake up miserable and the night round you is as black as pitch. . . . Alan, what in thunder is it all about?"

"I'll tell you."

"I defy you to."

"I can guess. It's twelve million pounds of the taxpayers' money. It's the nice safe jobs all those chaps have got for themselves. It's disgrace and dishonour. They're terrified that they've backed a loser."

Simon thought about it.

Alan expounded his theory. "They're scared stiff because somewhere someone has made a frightful mistake and they're covering up. They can see the game's up, or almost up, and they're getting clumsy."

"You can't pull *Arion's* officers into that argument. Luff and his boys can't be any part of it. They're not responsible for the ship as it's built."

"Why not? We don't know their backgrounds. We don't know who chose them or why they were chosen. They could well be the very men who have worked on her from the beginning. And what's a naval officer doing in command of a flying-ship? Hang it all, Simon, he's not even Fleet Air Arm! He's not a pilot. No wings. And the navigator. What was his name?"

"Skinner."

"Yes, Skinner. A civilian. I tell you this thing's rotten from the ground floor up. What is Skinner? Ex-air force? Ex-Department of Civil Aviation? I don't know. I've never heard of Skinner."

Simon started pacing back towards the car. "Mac said we had a free hand, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"He said the Minister for Supply was going grey with worry, didn't he?"

"He sure did."

"He said the Prime Minister was in a sweat, didn't he?"

"Yep."

"I think it's time for us to pay a call on Admiral Trotter at the Navy Department."

Rear-Admiral Sir Toby Trotter, K.C.B., D.S.O., was the Third Naval Member of the Naval Board. He was responsible for all naval construction, for the dockyards, ordnance, armament and material needs in general. When he was in Melbourne his office at Victoria Barracks was not open to every caller, but for Simon and Alan entry was easy. Years before, Sir Toby, then an untitled commodore, had been aboard the flagship of the U.S. Navy squadron with which Simon had co-operated to destroy a pirate base in the Pacific.* Sir Toby's friendship had been theirs from that day on.

His broad smile of greeting was as good as a tonic to their jaded spirits.

"Aah," he said, "my very good friends. How nice of you to call."

He shook their hands warmly, personally, pulled up a couple of chairs and beamed widely. A Dickensian character was Sir Toby. Jovial, plump, with baby-pink cheeks, a most unseaman-like paunch, and pudgy short fingers. Sir Toby Trotter was, nevertheless, as tough a man and as tough an admiral as ever stalked the deck.

"My very good friends, what brings you here?"

* See *Simon Black in Peril*.

"Do we have to pull our punches, Sir Toby?"

"Here," said the admiral, "a spade is a spade. If you've any punching to do, punch."

"*Arion.*"

Sir Toby sat up.

"We've been pulled in by the P.M. for the maiden voyage and we can't get any co-operation. We've just been kicked out of A.P.M."

"Kicked out?"

"Neck and crop. We were treated like some odorous form of animal life."

"They wouldn't dare."

"They dared and did. But we're not worried about that; we're upset of course, but we haven't come looking for sympathy. We want to know what you know about *Arion*."

The admiral's face puckered into an expression of contempt. He then held the end of his chubby nose between two fingers and blinked like an owl. "The *Arion*," he said in nasal tones, "is junk."

"Not your personal opinion, Sir Toby," said Simon quietly, "but the considered opinion of the Naval Board."

The admiral released his suffering nose and noisily blew it. "*Arion* is a politician's ship, my good friends. A prestige ship, designed to impress the world with the fact that Australia no longer rides upon the sheep's back. Mark my words, if this is the best Australia can do, she would be far safer on the sheep's back. *Arion* is fundamentally wrong. A ship's a ship and an aeroplane's an aeroplane and never the twain shall meet. Who's supposed to command it—a sailor or an airman? Who's supposed to navigate it—an airman or a sailor? What in heaven's name are we, the navy, supposed to do with it?"

"Thanks," said Simon. "Now, what can you tell me about the crew?"

"It's not a navy crew, if that's what you mean."

"I mean, who are they? Where do they come from? Who chose them and why? Where does Commander Luff fit in?"

"Luff was the skipper of a destroyer. A good seaman, but I'll tell you why he fits in. He's Scott's nephew."

"I see," said Simon.

"It's a clique. Tight as a knot. All knitted together like a sock. It's unhealthy. They might be pulling together, but I wouldn't give you twopence for the lot of them. Luff's been attached to A.P.M. for six months or more. Two other officers went over with him. Each man was asked for individually by name. We had to concede the request, but the officers concerned are on leave. Get that. On extended leave without pay. If anyone pays them A.P.M. pays them. Not us. So don't let them bluff you. They're not navy."

"So they can't throw the book at us?"

"They can't throw anything at you."

"Scott has said we will not be allowed aboard. Luff, in his position as captain, has said the same thing."

"Bluff. *Arion* is not a commissioned ship. The navy has no jurisdiction over it and doesn't want jurisdiction. If you have the authority of the P.M. and the Minister of Supply, they can't stop you—though it would be better for you personally if they did—"

Simon interrupted. "We're looking for the breath of reason, Sir Toby, and we've always breathed it round here before. You said I needn't pull my punches. I've learnt this much today, that where *Arion* is concerned logic goes out the window. No one will look at this thing objectively. Hysteria unlimited."

"Of course it's hysteria unlimited. It's just no good. *Arion's* a novelty. A gimmick. A stunt. And it's jinxed. Mark my word, it'll come to a sticky end. If a ship's bad, it's bad. I've heard talk of sabotage, but I don't believe it. The Walwyn Naval Dockyard is under my command and an accusation of sabotage is an accusation against me. There's been no sabotage. I'll swear it. If you go aboard that monstrosity wear your life-jackets and never take them off. Better still, take a trip to the South Pole and stay there until the whole thing blows over or blows up. What next?"

Simon wasn't getting anywhere. Logic, indeed, had gone out the window. Already he had sensed that he had reached the useful limits of this interview, but he pressed on. "Tell me about Dr Ross Chant, the designer of *Arion*."

"That nut!"

"Yes."

"Round the bend. A raving lunatic. They're all lunatics. If I were the P.M. I'd put a bomb under the lot of them. I've met Chant often enough—when he's been in trouble—and the first time he reduced me to anger, the second time to tears, and the third time he gave me the screams and has continued to give them to me ever since."

"One more thing," said Simon grimly. "Why was *Arion* built at a naval dockyard?"

"They caught us at a weak moment. But we've got to be honest. We did think it had possibilities. Have you seen the ship yourself?"

"No."

"Seen the plans?"

"No."

"Why not? Scared to look at them?"

"Not scared. We've been refused permission."

The admiral blinked. "By whom?"

"Scott."

Sir Toby's pudgy fingers walked deliberately across his desk and flicked up an intercom switch. "Benson."

"Yes, sir."

"Do we have a copy of the plans for A.P.M. 1?"

"Yes, sir."

"Dig them out and record that they have been issued on loan to Wing Commander Black."

Sir Toby switched off and blinked at them again in his owl-like fashion. "Pick them up on your way out, and note, in particular, the position of life-rafts, dinghies, and escape hatches. You'll need them. And forget that you're supposed to be gentlemen when the time comes to escape. You head for the nearest hatch and take a nose-dive straight through it."

The admiral's intercom buzzed. "Yes, Benson," he said.

"Dr Ross Chant is waiting to see you, sir. I told him you were engaged."

The admiral's jaw dropped and his bright little eyes stared in astonishment at Simon and Alan.

"Sir," repeated the unseen Benson, "Dr Ross Chant is waiting to see you."

"I heard. I heard. He can wait."

Sir Toby switched off and breathed out deeply. "I'll be darned . . . I thought they'd locked him up. . . . Chant! What brings him here? What could have happened this time? I thought *Arion* had run the gamut of all conceivable accidents short of total destruction. Confound Chant!"

"When you see him it's trouble?"

Sir Toby snorted.

"But you are going to see him—of course!"

"Confounding Chant!"

"Yes, Sir Toby. But what about him?"

"Confounding him, I say, and confounding you, too, for speaking of him. It's the power of the mind. You've willed him out of fresh air. I don't like the man. Never have liked him."

"Could it be, sir, that you don't like him because you don't like his ship?"

Sir Toby snapped, "No. I do not approve of our former enemies being allowed into the service of our government, not at any level, and certainly not at his level."

"Come again," said Simon.

"He's German."

"My sainted aunt!"

"You're not serious, sir."

"I'm deadly serious. Ross Chant is no more his real name than Jack Robinson is yours. Of course, you'd never pick it. His English is flawless. He changed his name by deed poll back in 1952. If it hadn't been for his brains they would never have let him into the country."

"I'll be blowed. Mac told us nothing of this."

"No. For an ex-diplomat Mac sometimes shows an appalling lack of discretion. Mac says the past is buried, that Chant was never a Nazi, that he's dedicated his life to his new country and to science. Poppycock, I say."

Simon actually began to smile. "Sir Toby," he said, "I'm beginning to see the light. At last this thing begins to make some sense. . . . But you will see him, please. I can't think of a

better time or place than now for all of us. How about it, Alan?"

"Don't let him get away. Let's stick to him like glue. A nice man-to-man talk, in private, away from all those stooges at A.P.M., should be very enlightening."

Sir Toby grunted. "You know how I feel about it, and I'm not an old fool. But it's for you. Understand, it's for you." He flicked his switch again. "Benson, send Dr Chant in."

"I'm sorry, sir, but he's gone."

The admiral stared at the little box on his desk from which the voice had issued.

"Gone?"

"Yes, sir. He couldn't wait."

"Bless my soul! It's only been a delay of two or three minutes."

"He observed the plans for A.P.M. i on my desk, sir. I think that was what changed his mind. He asked me what I was doing with them."

"And you told him?"

"Yes, sir. He is the designer, sir."

"By gad Benson. You'll walk the plank."

"I'm—I'm sorry, sir, but he is the designer and . . . and . . ."

"Now, look here, Benson. What did he say, precisely, and what did he do, precisely?"

"He said obviously you were busy and that it was only a courtesy call anyway. He said he would correct our copy of the plans to bring it up to date and would hand them over to Wing Commander Black when he met him at the dock-yard in the morning."

"BENSON! YOU UNMITIGATED IDIOT!"

"Yes, sir, and then Dr Chant left."

"You'll be strung from the yard-arm!"

"Yes, sir."

"By the hair."

"Yes, sir."

"Chaaah!"

The admiral cut Benson off and if any man's brow could be as black as thunder Sir Toby's was.

"I'll screw his silly neck," he hissed.

"Don't blame poor Benson, sir."

"He disobeyed an order. I don't care who got the plans. Benson disobeyed an order. I wanted *you* to have those plans."

"But it is now fully apparent that A.P.M. does not intend us to have them."

"Surely you don't imply that Chant followed you here?"

Simon gestured. "I don't know what I imply. But it wouldn't have been difficult. On the other hand, it could be coincidence. It wouldn't be unreasonable that he might call on you on the eve of the maiden voyage."

"Confound Chant! Now where does this put you?"

"In the corner! Each with a big pointed dunce's cap. But if they expect us to abandon this mission they've got another think coming. I threatened them that I'd break them if I had to, and that's a threat I propose to keep."

That night Simon's rest was not undisturbed by his worries about Firefly 4. He had a brand-new set of worries.

The shocks and stormy interviews of that afternoon had at least established the background picture and had convinced Simon that the government certainly had something to be concerned about. His resentment against the orders which had taken him away from his own work had vanished from his mind. In a few hours he had been presented with a first-class mystery, and when Simon had his teeth into a mystery nothing else mattered.

These things he knew. He knew that *Arion* was not liked by the navy and that was an opinion he had learnt at the top. He couldn't have gone higher than Rear-Admiral Sir Toby Trotter. He knew that the question of sabotage was a vexed one. Half the people involved said it was sabotage; the other half said it wasn't.

He knew that *Arion's* construction had taken a year longer than planned and that the government had ordered her to sea—or else! He knew that she had to succeed, yet he knew that she probably would not succeed. He knew that she was a killer, that she was largely untried, untested. He knew that

the very name of her held a power over men. The sanest of men could not discuss her with reason or without bias.

Simon knew that she was nose-heavy and he had carefully studied the report from Don Chandler that had duly arrived at Laverton. Don's findings were disturbing. *Arion*, said Don, had not been built in accordance with the approved design. The bows had been heavily reinforced at a late stage of the construction for no apparent reason, and this added weight had not been balanced against the rest of the ship. Don didn't know why, except that Chant had stated that she *was* balanced.

Simon knew that the men of the A.P.M. Division were afraid. They were afraid of their ship, of the money she had cost, and of what her failure would mean to their own futures. They were afraid of Simon because his knowledge of aircraft performance and design placed him among the great of the aeronautical world. They knew they couldn't deceive him. They knew that if he accompanied *Arion* to sea his report on her performance would destroy them.

Simon knew that Mac had been right when he said that his presence would force the issue, and cause the guilty men, if any, to become over-cautious or reckless, and reckless they had become. Their behaviour was extraordinary, and that was why Simon had not pulled his punches. He had sensed the truth and had gone after it with the best weapon he had—his tongue.

Simon suspected that the structure of the A.P.M. Division was rotten; that it was built up on deceit and intrigue; that Scott and his team were guilty men and that it was very likely that Commander Luff and his officers were guilty men, too. And Simon knew that the fate of the government was in the balance; that no government could survive the questions that would be asked when Simon's report was made public. Yes, the Prime Minister had been very courageous to call Simon in. The Prime Minister must have known that if Simon's report destroyed the A.P.M. Division, the scandal would destroy the government as well. Simon was a national hero, and if he condemned *Arion*, *Arion* was as good as finished.

There remained, after all that, the shapeless shadow that was Dr Ross Chant, the German scientist who had become a British subject. Simon was no happier about him than Sir Toby Trotter, but for entirely different reasons. Sir Toby, the old firebrand, condemned Chant because he was of German birth, but Simon wouldn't hold the accident of birth against any man. Chant was entitled to a fair hearing no matter where he was born; in fact he was entitled to sympathy and understanding for that very reason. Simon knew many fellows of British birth who were neither good men nor good subjects of the Queen. What concerned Simon was that from Chant had come the theory of the jinx. From the mouth of the designer had come this astonishing story that *Arion* was devil-possessed and would destroy herself.

That, indeed, seemed to be the foundation upon which all this mystery and deceit had been built. Simon knew in his bones that if he didn't find a devil he would find something that looked very much like one.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CAUSEWAY

SAILING time for A.P.M. 1 *Arion* was 11.30 p.m. on Friday, an unusual hour in Simon's opinion for a vessel that was not held to a tight schedule or required to pay harbour dues. None of the explanations given fully satisfied Simon.

Scott and his team had stipulated that *Arion* was to sail at night. This they had planned long before Simon's entry into the picture. They wished her departure to be as secret as possible, and darkness, they said, was the obvious time to choose. Perhaps they were right there. Furthermore, progress out of Port Phillip Bay would of necessity be slow, and until the vessel reached the ocean no attempt would be made to increase power to the point where she would become air-borne. Until that time she would sail as an ordinary ship and be subject to all the normal rules of the road at sea. This would mean that when *Arion* attempted to become airborne for the first time at approximately 5 a.m. on Saturday morning she would have the advantage of a full span of daylight ahead of her. Perhaps that was fair enough. On the other hand it could mean that the A.P.M. Division were so uncertain of *Arion* even on the sheltered waters of the huge bay that they chose darkness to hide their shame. What disturbed Simon more than anything was the odd fact that *Arion* had not been subjected to the normal proving trials.

Surely the most important part of the development of any new ship or aircraft or automobile was the testing period —the weeks or months of patient trials in all operating conditions. It was on the results of those trials that the design and production staff could judge a new machine and correct its vices. There were occasions in the past when Simon had had to push a new type of aircraft into service without first having proved it, but the production of none of those aircraft had been beset with the problems which had caused *Arion*

to become known as a devil ship. Simon had had his troubles but nothing to compare with the misfortune that had dogged the construction of *Arion*.

That was the topic under discussion after breakfast in the officers' mess at Laverton on Friday morning. Simon and Alan had to admit that there were still many questions to answer, that there were some phases of the *Arion* affair that were very mysterious indeed, even dangerous. Perhaps the government's patience had been tried to the limit by repeated delays, but surely the government had no right to order the ship to sea without first proving that she was seaworthy. *Arion* might have cost twelve million pounds, but to send her to sea with a full crew and a number of observers seemed not only unwise but criminal. They could be sending all those men to their deaths.

The only thing that prevented Simon and Alan from leaving Laverton was Rex. Rex was expected in from Project S.B. but had still not arrived by 11.15, and Simon and Alan, despite their deep concern, could not delay their departure to the dockyard any longer. The instructions Mac had left them had stipulated that they must be aboard by 11.45 a.m.

Twelve noon was the deadline for all crewmen and all observers. After 12 noon No. 2 Dock was to be closed and placed under a strict security guard, and no one would be permitted to join the ship or to leave her.

Simon left orders that a car was to stand by and that if the dog arrived in the next fifteen minutes he was to be rushed to the dockyard. Simon believed that a good driver might get through the traffic in thirty minutes.

The non-arrival of Rex was worrying. Simon had telephoned Project S.B. at 8.45 a.m. and had been assured by the traffic officer that Rex was aboard an aircraft on the tarmac at that very instant and would arrive by 10.45. The dog had not been sent earlier because it had been understood that the duty for which he was required would not begin until the evening. The aircraft had certainly taken off, because its departure was signalled at 8.55 a.m. Simon had no choice but to entrust all inquiries to the duty pilot at Laverton. If the

aircraft had been delayed or forced down there was nothing more that Simon could do about it. His orders required him to be at the dockyard and time was short enough already.

The Walwyn Naval Dockyard was a unique establishment occupying the shores and waters of a small inlet on Port Phillip bay. It was surprisingly close to the city of Melbourne, yet was so placed as to be in almost total isolation. It was approached by a long straight causeway built up over salt-water marshes and tidal flats, with a permanent guard-house established every half-mile. To enter from any other direction overland was impossible. The only other approach was from the sea and then through a strongly defended harbour boom. All aircraft, including service machines, were forbidden under threat of heavy penalty to fly within a two-mile radius. All ingoing and outgoing civil aircraft were required, in fact, to approach the city airport from other directions, even when this demanded wide alterations of heading. Walwyn Naval Dockyard was as secret as its nearness to Melbourne allowed it to be.

Simon's car was stopped by dockyard police at the first guard-post. The car had to stop or crash through a boom that barred the road. At that point the only signs of the establishment itself were a distant chimney-stack and the faint outlines of three giant cranes. Simon and Alan knew that their driver had handed his pass to the examining officer but they were not aware of complications until they were requested to step into the guard-house.

Alan leant across. "What did he say, Simon?"

"He's ordering us out of the car."

"Hang it all. It's 11.45 now. We should be aboard."

The policeman's head came in through the window. "It's routine, sir," he said. "Everyone has to report to the guard-house. I can't raise the boom until you do."

Simon sighed. "It had better be pretty quick routine. Pile out, Alan."

They piled out and hurried into the guard-house, which was nothing more than one large room with a front door and a back door and a desk stationed midway between. The

uniformed official at the desk remained seated, with hands clasped, thoughtfully rubbing one thumb against the other with studied intent.

"Wing Commander Black? Squadron Leader Grant?"

"That's us."

The official's hands were clasped tightly now. "I'm sorry about this," he said.

"About what?"

"I've got my orders, sir. I can't understand them, but I've been instructed to keep you out. Why . . . ?"

Simon's expressive eyebrow almost stood on end. "So this little business of reporting to you is not routine?"

"No, sir."

"A trick to get us out of the car?"

"We had to do something, sir. It was the least embarrassing method. The orders, sir, came from Mr Scott, the director of A.P.M. I can't let you through, sir. You do understand, don't you?"

"Only too well. What did you say your name was?"

"Howarth, sir."

Simon turned to Alan whose normally ruddy complexion was fast assuming a fiery hue. "They're making it rough for us, Alan."

"Two can play at that game."

"That's what I'm thinking." Simon turned a grim eye on the official. "Mr Howarth," he said, "are you armed?"

"Do you mean with guns, sir?"

"I do."

"Yes, sir. We're armed."

"And I suppose you're expected to use your guns if the need arises?"

Howarth was becoming increasingly nervous. "We'd never use guns against you, sir."

"Splendid. Now how many guard-posts are there between here and the main gate?"

"Three more, sir."

"So, if we force our way through here it is your duty to inform the other posts?"

Howarth ran his fingers unsteadily through his thin hair.

"Yes, sir. It—it's never happened, but that is the procedure. I am required to telephone the other posts at once. You couldn't get through, sir. A boom would be lowered at each point. Don't make it any more difficult, please!"

"Alan . . . take a look at that boom outside. See if it's heavy enough to wreck a car."

Alan turned to leave, but his exit was blocked by the other guard, who stood resolutely in the doorway.

"What's this?" Alan snapped. "Nazi Germany?"

The guard flushed, but didn't step aside. "As Mr Howarth said," he murmured, "please don't make it any harder for us."

"This is impossible," roared Alan.

His right hand instantly flashed out, palm foremost, full into the guard's chest and pitched him through the doorway backwards until he reeled heavily against the car. Perhaps it was that Simon's patience broke at the same moment, but Alan's shout certainly helped to trigger his anger. Simon hated violence, but he hated more the wretchedness of this



man Scott that would turn two luckless dockyard police into stooges. That Simon had to vent his anger against two innocent men was a pity, but it was the only possible way. He snatched the telephone from the astonished Howarth's desk, almost from beneath the man's hand, and wrenched the lead bodily from the wall, then followed Alan through the door, slamming it shut.

In the few seconds it had taken Simon to reach the open air, Alan had ordered their wide-eyed driver out of the car and had personally raised the boom which barred the way. The guard—that unfortunate victim of Alan's mighty push—made no attempt to stop them. He stood at the kerb with his fists clenched over his chest, breathing heavily, watching this brief drama of which he was a part but of which he had no understanding. He saw the bewildered air force driver scramble onto the pavement only a yard from his own station and when the driver asked him, "What goes on?", he shrugged, because he didn't know.

The car doors slammed at the precise moment that the guard-house door opened and Howarth stumbled onto the pavement. Simon moved off, spinning the tyres with fierce acceleration, and roared down the causeway towards the distant dockyard.

Howarth watched the car go and if he had been asked to define his emotions he would have been hard-pressed to do so. He wasn't at all sure that he regretted their getting away from him. Howarth had a strong suspicion that his conscience was worrying him.

Simon pushed the car up to sixty and held it to the crown of the open road. "How's the time, Alan?"

"Eleven fifty-two."

"Eight minutes to go, huh?"

"Yes. In eight minutes the dock will be shut."

"Unless they've already closed it against us, Alan."

The second guard-house was in sight, rushing closer, but the boom wasn't down. The road was open and Simon went through the post at sixty, carrying with him the fleeting impression of a startled face that registered at the corner of his eye. All but instantly the guard whose face he had seen

appeared in the rear-vision mirror. He was gone in a second, leaping for the guard-house, and Simon knew that he was leaping for a telephone, and he could have kicked himself. The very haste he had used to escape had destroyed his hopes of getting through. This causeway was subject to a speed limit of thirty miles an hour. He might beat them through the third post, but they'd stop him at the fourth. They'd stop him unless he went like a rocket, unless he travelled faster than that guard could dial a telephone number and report the breach of regulations. These thoughts flashed through Simon's mind before he pushed the accelerator pedal to the floor and bore down on the third post at a speed already in excess of seventy miles an hour and howled through it and scarcely saw it.

The vast expanse of the dockyard was now fully in sight. Simon was aware of its presence, but not of its details. He saw only the ribbon of the road and the fourth guard-house lying ahead. He saw it and the huge semi-trailer that suddenly seemed to straddle the crown of the road immediately beyond the guard-house. At the speed at which Simon was travelling they'd meet head-on in fifteen seconds or less. His toe flashed to the brake pedal and he started easing over from the crown until a thunderous hail of gravel from the roadside began to roar up from the off-side tyres, until his speed had dropped to a shuddering forty and he had broken into a chilling sweat from head to toe. Speed on the road! It was terrifying. Suicidal.

The big truck hadn't budged from the crown. It had moved into the guard-post and there it had stopped, preventing the downward swing of the boom but barring Simon's progress much more effectively. He knew the guards had halted the vehicle to stop him, or to force him so far over to the side that to attempt to pass would have put him into the marshes.

The guards waited for him, dead ahead, and the truck driver jumped from his cab to join them. Simon crawled into the post at ten miles an hour, feeling like a criminal caught in the act, while Alan beside him fumed like a furnace. "Scott! That fat worm! He's beaten us."

"Easy, Alan. Let's play it out."

Simon stopped the car and the three men advanced on it menacingly; one guard placed a strong brown hand on the door handle and kept it there. "You," he said to Simon, "what's the big idea? This isn't a runway. Number 2 post says you went through at eighty."

"Sixty," said Simon politely.

"Who are you tryin' to kill?"

"No one," said Simon, smiling. "I wouldn't dare drive like a lunatic unless I had to. Be a good chap and shift that truck and let me through. This is urgent business for Rear-Admiral Sir Toby Trotter."

"Is it? I didn't know that Sir Toby used the air force for his errands."

"You know now," said Simon, with an edge to his voice, "and every minute of our time that you waste, old chap, puts you in deeper and deeper. You'd better shift that truck."

"Who did you say you were?"

"I didn't," said Simon. "Everything's in order. I wouldn't have got this far if it hadn't been."

"Okay, driver," growled the guard, "pull your truck over." He turned to Simon again. "And you keep your foot off the gas. Breaking the sound barrier on this causeway is a serious offence and it doesn't matter who commits it. Remember that, pilot."

"Certainly. I'm sorry."

"Run your car back and the truck can pull over."

The big truck was moving already and Simon reversed until the road was open. He changed gears, touched his cap to the guards, moved round the truck, and hit the last open stretch towards the dockyard. He was shaking like a leaf.

"Congratulations," said Alan. "I couldn't have done better myself."

"Thanks."

"The first post couldn't have got a message through."

"No. Not unless we strike trouble at the main gate. What's the time, Alan?"

"Two minutes to twelve."

"Holy smoke! Trouble at that gate and we're shot. We'll never get through to Number 2 Dock."

CHAPTER EIGHT

OUTRAGE

POP was in a fever—not an unusual condition for Pop, because at most times he was only a couple of degrees short of boiling point; but this was a fever of anger and anxiety and indignation, and he was not at all sure where one emotion ended and the next began.

Pop could never have foreseen the awful consequences of his desire to wish his boys *bon voyage* and to pass the dog Rex back into their care. Perhaps he had been curious to see *Arion*, and perhaps that was why he had directed his pilot to land at the civil airport. He knew that if he had taken the dog to Laverton he certainly would not have seen *Arion*. That was the tragedy. If he had taken the dog direct to Simon and Alan this awful affair would not have happened.

Pop arrived at the Walwyn Naval Dockyard in good time. He took up his station beside *Arion's* gangway at 11.25 a.m., determined not to miss Simon and Alan as they went aboard; but at precisely 11.26 a.m. he was requested, very firmly, by a man even bigger than himself to retire beyond the barrier. Pop stated that Wing Commander Black was his very own son and that he had every intention of staying precisely where he was until his son arrived. The reaction was astonishing. The big man raised a fist and shouted, "How did you get in here?"

Pop didn't like that very much. He shook his own fist and bellowed back, "Through the gate. How else?"

"You may leave then, by the same route. Get out!"

"And who's going to put me out?"

Pop learnt soon enough. Two armed guards escorted him to the barrier and he had his hands full keeping Rex from their throats. Rex, indeed, took such a dislike to the guards that Pop was bundled past the barrier and marched all the way to the main gate, a form of humiliation that Mr

Black did not enjoy one little bit, particularly as the route took him past the Commonwealth car in which he had arrived from Melbourne airport. The driver, to make matters worse, started the car and followed the undignified procession through the main gates and out onto the causeway. There were no half measures. Pop was kicked out, neck and crop.

The more Pop reflected upon that inglorious episode the harder he found it to believe. He, Black, had been made to look like some bumbling musical-comedy fool before a large and amused audience. Even now, the sentry at the gate was sniggering, trying manfully to conceal his mirth, but being quite unable to do so. That was why Pop refused to re-enter his car. He compelled the sentry to straighten his face by pacing across the gateway, back and forth, trailing Rex behind him, a very angry man indeed. Pop, despite the comic side to his character, a side of which he was not himself aware, was no man's fool. No one had to tell him that Simon and Alan were in serious difficulties. Pop may have been too upset to think at his best, but he rightly discerned that the A.P.M. Division were hostile to a dangerous degree and that it was very likely that Simon and Alan would not get aboard. In all honesty, Pop was not keen that they should get aboard, but he knew that they had been ordered to do so, and he knew that very soon there'd be a battle of wits at *Arion's* gangway that would be well worth seeing. They wouldn't dispose of Simon as easily as they had disposed of his father, and if Pop had not been caught by surprise he would have put up a far better fight himself.

That was the trend of his thinking, but as the clock crept closer and closer to noon Pop's anger took a peculiar turn. Of Simon and Alan there was still no sign, and he even began to wonder whether those boys of his had let him down. Had they been kicked out as he had been kicked out? Surely not.

By 11.55 Pop didn't know what angered him most—his own humiliation or the apparent humiliation of Simon and Alan. It never occurred to him that the message he had left in the control room at Melbourne airport had been mislaid

during a busy period. That was the message that would have told Simon the dog would be waiting for him at the ship. It was only the anxious inquiry from the duty pilot at Laver-ton, seeking clues as to the fate of the courier aircraft from Project S.B., that had jolted their memories. Of course, it was Pop's fault. He should not have alighted at the civil aero-drome. It was a thoughtless and selfish action, typical of him, but he had been that way for too long to change at his time of life.

At ninety seconds to noon Pop saw the big Ford roaring down the causeway towards him. He knew it was a staff car, and even before he identified the characteristic alertness of Simon's head and shoulders he knew Simon was the driver. Pop didn't forget the manner in which he had been humbled, but he did forget the sense of defeat that had been growing in him. Simon would show them. He'd show 'em. He'd set this A.P.M. Division right back on its heels.

The car squealed to a halt beside him and the passenger-side door swung open and Alan jumped out.

"You've got Rex. Good man."

Alan snatched the lead and bundled the excited dog into the car and Simon shouted, "Thanks, Pop. Can't stop. Only got a minute."

Pop leant over the mudguard and pummelled it with his fist. "Simon! Go in punching! They threw us out!"

"Sure, Pop. Sure."

"Hit 'em, Simon. Don't let 'em do it to us."

"That's right, Pop."

The car moved off, but not very far. It was stopped by the upraised hand of the sentry.

Pop saw Simon's head poke from the driving window and heard his crisp question. "What's wrong, guard?"

"No entry, sir."

"No entry, my foot."

The Ford revved and lurched and the sentry had to leap aside to save life and limb. Simon bowled straight down the main road, swung wildly to the left at the signpost to No. 2 Dock and in an instant was gone from sight. When the sentry started shouting, Pop shook a fist at him, climbed into his

own car, and with his last tattered shred of dignity ordered the driver back to the airport. He was far too irritable to notice the big black car that drew in towards the main gate as he left.

Simon braked hard at the barrier. "Time, Alan?"

"A minute to twelve."

The doors swung open and Rex, sensing a fight, joyously leapt to the road, and after him Alan heaved two travelling bags, two greatcoats and then himself. Simon came bounding round from the other side, took his own bag and his own coat and, still stooping, looked Alan in the eye. "Ready?"

"I'll say."

"Hang on to Rex."

"Sure."

Already they were conscious of the extraordinary appearance of *Arion*, startling from this angle, from the stern, with the enormous swept-back hydroplane on her port side actually lying over the dockside like a canopy to keep off the rain. Conscious, too, of the long dock stretching away from them towards the sea; of men elsewhere, up on scaffolding, hammering, painting, walking, staring, busy and idle; even aware of the distant figure of Scott in the sunlight, alone, against the receding lines of the dock. As well as the impressions of sight there were impressions of sound and of smell, brief impressions but vivid—the noise of riveting hammers shattering the air away to their left, of voices, of machinery, of seabirds squawking, an extraordinary odour of lacquers, pitch, oil, ozone, and the acidity of scorching metal.

They also sensed the threat represented by the silent guards at the barrier, two guards whose eyes were on Simon and Alan and Rex. Alan felt the savage tug against the lead in his hand as Rex swung out, snarling, towards the guards. Rex didn't like the guards and Alan realized that Pop's shouted statement must have been literally true. He had been thrown out and Rex remembered it.

The siren blew for twelve noon and lunch. The piercing note suddenly let loose into the sounds of industry was a shock to nerves and ears. It was still screeching when they

stepped across the line, past the two guards, ignoring the command to stop.

The siren wound down into a final groan and the busy dockyard seemed to drop dead. Riveting hammers were silent. Machines stopped. Engines faded and spluttered into stillness.

"You!" said the voice of a guard. "You heard me. You can't enter."

Simon and Alan walked away from the voice, disregarding it, towards *Arion* and the resolute figure of Scott.

"HALT, OR I FIRE!"

Simon turned and looked back into the barrel of a rifle. "Don't be silly," he said to the guard. "Put that thing down. It might go off."

The guard didn't put it down and his companion came forward, hand outstretched. "Your passes, please."

"Certainly," said Simon.

They dropped their travelling bags, slung their great-coats over their shoulders, and each produced a pass while Rex still tugged on the lead held firmly in Alan's right hand. The guard stood just beyond the limit of Rex's reach and gestured. "Give me the passes."

"You can see them," said Simon. "If you want to read the small type come closer."

"I will if you shorten the lead on the dog."

It was Alan's turn to shrug. "Can't," he said blankly. "He's too strong. He doesn't like you. He wants to eat you."

Simon returned his pass to his wallet, picked up his bag and waited for Alan to follow suit, while Rex tugged and showed his teeth and bristled and revealed the guard to be only half the man he believed himself to be.

"Okay, Alan."

They turned their backs on the guard with the outstretched hand and on the other guard with the rifle and again faced *Arion* and the still waiting figure of Scott.

Arion, now, looked like a gigantic barrel with side fins and an enormous towering tail rearing to one hundred and forty feet above the water, but it was Scott that held their attention, not *Arion*.

Again the loud-mouthing guard roared at them. "Halt, or I fire!"

They walked away from him. They knew he wouldn't fire. They knew he might choke with indignation, but he wouldn't fire. They walked on, down the long beam, beneath rows of portholes, towards the V-shaped shadow of the overhanging port hydroplane, towards the figure of Scott standing in the sunlight just short of the shadow.

Twenty yards from Scott they realized that *Arion* was more than an astonishing vessel; she was a truly beautiful vessel, a superb blending of the crafts of the aircraft builder and the ship builder.

Five yards from Scott they had forgotten that *Arion*, as such, existed.

"That'll do," barked Scott. "Not another inch."

Behind him they could see the gangway with Commander Luff at the head of it, framed in the wide entrance door to the ship. The door was placed just behind and below the point where the tapered trailing edge of the hydroplane joined the hull. They were conscious again of the portholes, deck upon deck of them, still receding before them towards the bows beneath the hydroplane, the remarkable pattern of wind-blast apertures in that hydroplane, and the gleaming white paint. They were conscious of these things yet did not really see them. They saw only the revolver in Scott's hand.

"To get this far," Scott grated, "you must have broken every rule in the book, but I warned you. I said I'd stop you if I had to do it myself."

"Boloney," sighed Simon.

Alan tugged Rex's lead and dropped it. "Get him!"

The dog leapt, a snarling mass of fury, and sank his teeth into Scott's right sleeve, and dragged the huge man down; the revolver, fired by the force of its impact against the dock, discharged a bullet over the sea.

"Rex!"

The dog backed away, bristling and growling with hatred.

Scott, for the moment, didn't get up. He sprawled on the dockside, spluttering and fuming, and watched Simon kick the revolver far out of reach, forward into the shadow of the

hydroplane. They could hear the sharp clatter of Luff's heels coming down the gangway, sensed him stoop to recover the revolver, and heard the angry threats of the two guards, now emboldened to rush them from the rear.

Alan reached for Rex's lead again and from the corner of his eye saw a number of workmen sprinting up from behind the guards. They were outnumbered so heavily that it simply didn't matter. They'd never get aboard this ship, not now. Crew members were cramming the gangway. Men were coming through the barrier in dozens. The sound of that shot, or the alarm from the sentry at the main gate, had alerted the dockyard from end to end. Simon and Alan would be very lucky to get away without actual physical harm.

They knew they were in a jam. They knew that Rex couldn't help them now. They knew that their own side of the story would never be heard. Scott and Luff, aided by this mass of men, would hound them back to the causeway. Scott was on his feet again, dishevelled, shouting abuse, threatening law proceedings for assault, and Commander Luff, white and silent, glared at the two airmen with absolute hatred.

In seconds, Simon and Alan were surrounded, with Rex held close to them on a very short lead. They were hemmed in, together with Scott and Luff. They couldn't have broken out if they had tried. This was the penalty for fighting force with force. They were the ones who had been provoked, but they would never be believed. One couldn't argue with a mob.

"Lock them in the guard-house!" screamed Scott. "Take them away! They'll rue the day they ever heard my name."

"Do as Mr Scott says," ordered Luff. "Take them away."

Simon glanced at Alan, but didn't bother speaking. What was the use in this uproar? Scott had beaten them. Just where that was going to put Scott time alone would tell; but he had won this round, hands down.

The two guards shouldered their way into the centre, hugging their rifles, sweating, pale, and very determined.

"Off you go," barked Luff, "and hold that dog down or he'll be shot. You chaps must be mad. Surely you didn't expect to get away with it. Mad. Mad!"

The mob parted and Simon and Alan were pushed through

it, with the rifle barrels jammed into their backs, with Rex tugging and twisting and spitting against Alan's iron grip on his collar. It was very shabby. Very nasty.

They were bundled along the dockside with Scott still screaming almost insane taunts at them from behind. The man was beside himself with rage. He was so distraught he didn't see the three grim men who barred the progress of the untidy procession thirty yards short of the barrier. Scott didn't know what was happening, and neither did Simon or Alan until a thunderous voice roared in command.

"Leave these men be, or, by glory, I'll horsewhip the lot of you!"

Rear-Admiral Sir Toby Trotter, K.C.B., D.S.O., that plump and jovial seaman, looked about twenty feet tall. In fifty years he had not been moved so deeply by righteous indignation. He stood legs astride, rock-like, in all the splendour of his gold braid and immaculate black, beating one fist into the other, thundering.

The sudden silence, the sudden consternation, the sudden dismay, that possessed that dockside had to be experienced to be believed. Sir Toby was benign, kindly, and greatly loved. His officers and men worshipped him. The employees of the dockyard were convinced he was the salt of the earth. Sir Toby in a thundering rage was something they had never seen.

No. They had never seen Sir Toby like this; neither him nor the two men beside him. Those two men may not have expressed their anger but it was there to see very plainly.

One was Captain Austin, R.A.N., manager of the dockyard, and the other was the Minister for Supply.

"Mr Scott"—Sir Toby's voice crackled—"am I to believe the evidence of my eyes and ears? Am I, by glory! No power on earth gives you this authority. THIS IS MY DOCKYARD. Remove yourself from it at once. Board your monstrosity and stay aboard it!"

Scott pulled himself together, drew himself to his full height, marshalled every fibre of his nerve. "Sir Toby," he said tightly, "these louts assaulted me."

"Your impertinence, sir! Ordering my police to forbid

the entry of these two gentlemen. Gentlemen, I say! Confound your cheek, sir! You leave me speechless."

Captain Austin waved a very firm arm at the mob. "Carry on. Back to wherever you should be. Guards, your post is at the barrier. Return to it and close it. Move! MOVE!"

They moved, all of them. Even the members of *Arion's* crew started retreating to the gangway. When all were out of earshot, except Scott and Commander Luff, the Minister fixed Scott with a very grave eye.

"Mr Scott," he said, "I find myself in complete agreement with Sir Toby Trotter. You have committed a serious offence. You would be well advised to board your ship at once and stay there, and if I hear of one more instance of your resisting these two gentlemen in the execution of their duty you will be dismissed without right of appeal. Did you imagine, for one moment, that you could victimize two men such as these without my learning of it? Why they did not personally report you I cannot imagine. Their patience is far, far greater than mine. I never would have stood for it. Your behaviour has shocked the government, sir. Shocked us."

Scott's mouth opened; he took a breath . . .

"Not a word," snapped the Minister. "Nothing you can say can undo what you've done; nothing, except an apology to the two gentlemen you have so grievously insulted."

"Apology?"

"Yes, Mr Scott."

"Never. On principle."

He swung on his heel and trod heavily back to the gangway and climbed it and passed from sight without once turning his head. Luff, by now, had recovered his poise. He stood strictly to attention, ignoring all eyes and all distractions.

The Minister continued. "Commander Luff, you have been part of a most unfortunate incident. I feel I must ask you this question."

"Yes, sir."

"Were you aware that these two gentlemen were ordered by me to join your crew, ostensibly as observers, but in fact as very much more?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you have no excuse."

"Absolutely none. My uncle—Mr Scott, sir—informed me what their duties were to be, and I will apologize. I have the greatest admiration for Wing Commander Black and Squadron Leader Grant. But if I may speak for my uncle in his absence, *Arion* is his life. It's his reason for living. Please forgive him. I'm afraid his obsession has clouded his judgment. You *will* accept my apology?"

Simon smiled. "Of course."

"And you, Squadron Leader Grant?"

"Forget it," said Alan. "We'll consider it never happened."

"Thank you."

Luff drew himself up sharply and saluted, turned, and marched like a guardsman back to his ship.

"Now," said Simon to Sir Toby, "how did all this happen?"

"You told me yourselves, yesterday, that you had run into trouble. I merely followed it up and had the Minister fly down from Canberra this morning. We're very sorry about it. Dreadfully sorry."

"So are we," said Alan. "But I still don't trust that Luff fellow an inch farther than I trust his uncle."

Simon glanced quickly at Alan.

"He's right," said the admiral. "They're as thick as thieves. Are you chaps armed?"

"Yes," said Simon in some surprise.

"Keep your guns handy. Strap them under your armpits. Take no more nonsense. We're allowing this ship to sea with the gravest misgivings, but there's too much at stake to cancel the sailing. The Minister has convinced me of that."

"And how," said Simon, "has he convinced you? How, sir? This is a question we have been asking ourselves."

The Minister sighed. "Press statements were prepared a week ago and circulated to our embassies throughout the world for release tomorrow. The U.S. Navy has prepared special docking facilities at Pearl Harbour and the Americans don't do things by halves. *Arion* will be escorted in beneath a massed formation of aircraft and feted upon arrival. There are a dozen reasons. We're too deeply involved. We can't pull out."

It was Alan, with typical bluntness, who took the Minister to task. "There's only one real reason, sir, and that's pride. Everyone's trying to save face. From the top right down to the bottom. Am I right?"

"Perhaps. . . . But is the good name of our country worth so little that we can't make a fight for it?"

"That's an unfair question, sir."

The Minister's eyes twinkled. "If it is, so is yours."

From his briefcase the Minister then extracted a long and fat envelope and passed it to Simon. "I believe you have had difficulty," he said, "in securing the plans of *Arion*. This is your personal copy, fully corrected. Now, it's time you were aboard. Good luck to you both."

They shook hands and parted on the dockside, the Minister, the admiral and the captain walking back to the barrier, Simon, Alan and Rex turning again towards the gangway.

They paused at the foot of the gangway and Simon glanced critically along the length of *Arion*, beneath the overhanging hydroplane, really appraising the lines for the first time.

"Impressive, Alan."

Alan didn't comment. He realized instantly that Simon was putting off the evil moment, that Simon was, in fact, far more upset about this than he had admitted aloud.

"She must be three hundred feet long, Alan, from stem to stern."

Alan was right. Simon was putting it off. He didn't want to go aboard.

"Two decks above the hydroplanes and two decks below the hydroplanes. Interesting. Wings really, Alan, not hydroplanes. The lines of a bird but not of a bird in full flight. It's the sweep-back that does it. Reminds me of a hawk or an eagle, bunched up before touching down. . . . I like the look of her."

"But the navy doesn't."

"No." Simon was becoming a little wary of Alan's expression. "And the navy must have its reasons. . . . Twelve million pounds! Thunder, this thing had better work! But she's too wide in the beam perhaps. Perhaps that's the trouble. Re-

member she was like a barrel from the stern. Until she's airborne she's going to roll like a tub."

Alan's patience with Simon suddenly ran out, and he exploded. "And what's wrong with you? You're only putting it off! Why don't you get up the gangway and face it?"

Simon grunted, because Alan was so right. "I HATE this job," he said through his teeth.

Simon was sick at heart, but he grabbed the rail and plodded up the slope towards the entrance door.

At the top of the ramp they passed between two seamen who stood rigidly to attention but whose faces expressed a strong degree of misery and embarrassment. "Cheer up," said Alan quietly, and stepped over the lip immediately behind Simon.

They realized at once that this was C Deck. The large painted sign over the companionway directly in front of them left them in no doubt. They realized, too, that the short, slight, blond man with the closely cropped beard who stood on the first step was waiting for them.

"Wing Commander Black?"

Simon nodded.

"I'm Ross Chant."

He stepped forward, almost with eagerness, and grasped Simon's right hand. "Welcome aboard."

Simon was caught by surprise and he knew that his face showed it. "Thank you," he said. "And this is Squadron Leader Grant."

"Delighted," Chant said.

"Same here," said Alan, hesitating and squinting, but accepting the handclasp.

"And this, I presume, is the famous Rex?"

"That's Rex," said Simon in increasing wonderment, for there was no mistaking that Rex was impressed by the doctor. He favoured that gentleman by nudging him with his nose. Simon caught Alan's puzzled frown and was in complete sympathy. Personally, he was astonished—by Chant and his attitude, and by the fact that apart from the two seamen there was not another living soul to be seen. This narrow passage, which apparently encircled the ship and passed

through the massive alloy girders that formed the roots of the hydroplanes, was deserted. Going aft it was illuminated by daylight through the portholes, but going for'ard it receded into an increasing gloom.

"I will be honoured," said Chant, "if you will allow me to escort you to your cabin."

"We have a *cabin*?" queried Simon.

"More cabins than passengers. You may make your own choice if you wish."

"Your choice will do," said Simon. "And by the way—"

"Yes?"

"Those plans you were going to have for us . . . ?"

"I have them. You'll get them."

They followed him then—not up the companionway as they had expected, but for'ard through the network of girders—repeatedly glancing at each other in amazement. It was not *Arion* that impressed them but this completely unforeseen turn of events. Chant seemed to be a rattling good fellow—approachable, sane, and far better mannered than any other person they had yet encountered in the entire structure of A.P.M. Yet Sir Toby didn't like him. Sir Toby had no time for him at all. It was odd.

They passed door after door after door on either side of them; they passed two companionways within the structure of the port-side hydroplane itself, but still went for'ard into an unlighted gloom. Here there were no portholes and the artificial lighting was not switched on. They reached the wide curve near the bows, changing direction as they followed the arc of the passage until they were certain they were as far for'ard as they could go, and the warm gloom was little short of total darkness.

"Through here, gentlemen." Chant was opening a bulkhead door.

"You could do with some lights, Doctor."

"We'll have them shortly, when they start the engines. At the present time all installations are being checked and serviced. . . . After you, gentlemen."

They stepped through like lambs to the slaughter. The bulkhead door crashed shut behind them and Chant was gone.

CHAPTER NINE

THE MONSTROSITY

DARKNESS was absolute. They could see nothing, not even each other. The only sound in the silence was a troubled growl from Rex.

Alan's voice was hoarse. "My sainted aunt! Tell me it's not true."

"We're locked up, by thunder! Locked up! This is an outrage."

Simon dropped his coat and his bag and groped for the door. He found it all right, but there was no handle on the inside. He ran his fingertips round the edge of it and detected the butt ends of the hinges, but nothing else.

"Great Scott!" he breathed. "We are, you know. Locked up. I don't get it. What on earth do they think they're doing? They're a pack of lunatics."

"Which is exactly what Sir Toby said they were."

"A pack of raving lunatics, Alan. How do they expect to get away with it? What . . ." Simon's voice failed him.

"What we want," said Alan, "is a light. I've a torch in my bag somewhere. You, too, haven't you?"

"Yes. And that's an idea. Let's have some light."

Simon fumbled in the darkness for the bag he had dropped, but he had lost his sense of direction and couldn't find it. He was crawling on his hands and knees when the beam of Alan's torch solved the problem for him.

They drew together and Alan turned the beam slowly round the room. There were two bunks on one wall, two bunks on the opposite wall, a small table bolted to the floor and four canvas stools. There were no windows or portholes of any kind. In one corner was a door but it was not the door through which they had entered. They investigated and discovered that it led to a small shower-room and lavatory. Again no windows or portholes of any kind. The only venti-

lation was a forced-draught air vent in the ceiling which might have offered an escape to a courageous mouse.

"Gad," growled Simon, "this is serious. This is a prison cell."

"And so say all of us."

They returned to the main room, flabbergasted, and Alan moved off on his own, looking for a light switch, and found one beside the door. A touch, and the room was illuminated by a bare globe screwed into a ceiling socket.

"No light, my foot!" Simon snorted. "I'll no-light him when I catch him! If we'd used our brains we would have twigged it then. They're still drawing power from the shore supply."

"Rex," said Alan sadly, "you let us down, old boy. Why'd you make a fuss of that rogue? Look what he's done to your Uncle Alan."

"I'm here, too," said Simon.

Alan rocked on his heels. "We're in clink. No doubt about it. Clapped in irons."

Simon sat on the table. "Pull up a chair, Mr Grant."

"Certainly, sir."

"We've got to get to the bottom of this."

"That's what you've been saying for the last twenty-four hours."

"This time, my friend, I mean it. I'm beginning to feel a few funny ideas."

"Funny ha-ha, or funny peculiar?"

"The reason for this conspiracy, Alan, begins to rear its ugly head. They're all in it and you can't tell me they're not. I'm beginning to wonder whether this ship will ever see Pearl Harbour—whether it sails, floats or flies. I'm even beginning to wonder whether they ever intended to take it there."

Alan did sit down then. He reached for a stool and straddled it and rocked backwards and forwards. "Simon. . . . That's a shocking thing to say."

"So you disagree?"

"No. I wish I could." Alan's face was a study of dismayed concentration. "It adds up, Simon," he went on. "It's the only reason that's strong enough. . . . Grand theft! They wouldn't

dare lock us up for any other reason. Do you reckon it's a foreign power?"

"I can't see a foreign power being that stupid. It'd be enough to start a war, and no one wants to start a war."

Alan brought Simon back onto the beam. "Now, don't talk yourself out of it. It was your idea and it was a sound one. If these chaps had any intention of returning to base we wouldn't be locked up now, which—which does, you know, make me wonder what they're going to do to us."

Simon pulled a wry face.

"With all due modesty," continued Alan, "we are people of consequence, and the Minister really trounced Scott on the dock. No, sir. We're not locked up because their noses are out of joint. It goes deeper than that. Old Mac didn't put us on board for the fun of it. Mac can smell a rat a mile off. I only wish the old bat had confided in us. He must have known."

"Known what?"

"That there was a nigger in the woodpile. These things don't happen out of the blue. They simmer for months. Years. I tell you, Simon, if we're to get out of this room alive we'd better start thinking. . . . We've got our orders, whatever they are. We're aboard, aren't we? Surely we can open them now."

Simon unbuttoned the flap of his inside pocket and drew the thin envelope into the light and tapped it against the palm of his left hand. "Yes," he murmured, "we are aboard, aren't we? But Mac said we were not to open it until we sailed."

"Do you think he meant it literally?"

"I'm perfectly certain he did. He made a point of it. He said we were to wait until *Arion* put to sea."

"You're making a mistake, Skipper. This is an emergency."

"Orders are orders. We're not at sea." Simon slid the envelope back again and buttoned the flap. "Instead," he said, "let's go over the plans. We may find they're going to help us a great deal. A.P.M. have taken such pains to keep us away from them that I'm anxious to find out why."

Simon broke the seal on the fat envelope that the Minister had given him, unfolded the contents, and carefully flattened

on the table no fewer than twenty-five tissue-thin sheets of photographic paper.

"My sainted aunt!" breathed Alan. "You're not going to master these in a couple of hours. It'll take a couple of days."

"Okay, Alan. Two heads are better than one. Pull your stool round to this side."

Simon quickly thumbed through the sheets and extracted the detailed drawing of installations on C deck.

"Yes," he drawled. "See this. That's the passage we came along, right through the root of the port hydroplane, through here, along here, up to the bows. No portholes at all and that's why. Most of C Deck for'ard is actually inside the hydroplane structure. We must be about forty feet back from the bows. The bow compartment itself is a missile room with four tubes firing forward. And that means we're here." His finger jabbed downward on the plan.

"Detention quarters."

"Dead right. Every ship has its brig and we're in it. And immediately behind us are the compressors. Yes, that follows. This is going to be a rowdy place when the engines start, Alan. They're slap against the bulkhead behind us. C Deck's the hub of the ship all right. Fuel tanks, compressed-air tanks, pipelines, air-conditioning plant, electrical generators, storage batteries. . . . Wow! There's half a day's work on this page alone. . . . This is interesting. Chant's concentrated all the heavy stuff between the hydroplanes. This one deck for'ard must be almost half the weight of the ship and, before I see another thing I'm prepared to say that Don Chandler is right. She must be nose-heavy. . . . Okay, have you got your notebook?"

"I'll get it."

"Do that. I want you to record all my comments. When we've finished we'll sort them out and see what we've learnt. . . . And pull your revolver out of your bag and keep it handy."

Simon worked at high pressure for nine hours without pause or interruption, pushing himself hard because he knew that of all the things against him time was his greatest enemy. He wanted a picture of this ship in his mind, from stem to stern,

before she sailed. He wanted to know exactly where to go to reach any chosen point, whether he escaped from this room or not. He wanted to be able to predict *Arion's* behaviour on the open sea. He sought to memorize the location of every vital part. He sought to understand the principle of the ship's power and the methods by which she brought the power into use. He attempted to estimate her possible speed and the response she might be expected to give to the operation of her controls. There were times when he filled pages of his own notebook with figures to solve a single problem. There were times when he sat, utterly absorbed, lost to Alan, creating in his mind an image of the ship as a whole against a background of combat or storm. He was merciless in his appraisal. He searched not for *Arion's* virtues but for her shortcomings and her vices, and he found faults, he found weaknesses, but he had to admit that in almost every case the fault in question was obviously a compromise, something that had been forced upon the designer because there was no other way out.

At 10.25 p.m. he carefully rearranged the plans in their correct order, folded them, returned them to the envelope and secured them to his calf with a length of elastic-topped sock from which the foot had been cut. He then creaked from his stool and slowly stretched his cramped limbs and began to pace the length of the cell and back again. Alan remained seated, scratching his red head with the blunt end of his pencil, and most acutely aware of the aching emptiness of his stomach.

"The blighters haven't fed us," he complained.

"And I'm certain they won't," said Simon. "Not until *Arion* is safely through Port Phillip Heads and the harbour pilot has gone ashore. They're not going to give us the slightest chance of escaping from this room and upsetting their arrangements. They know that the instant they open that door we'll have Rex at their throats."

"And what do you think of *Arion*?"

Simon considered his reply and framed it carefully. "If it's built to these plans, detail for detail, it's almost a product of genius. It's almost wonderful. There's only one thing."

"And what's that?"

"Don Chandler said that the hull was designed for one purpose alone—to reduce drag. That's fair enough; after all, what hull isn't? But the reason given doesn't satisfy me, because Chandler said she was going to need every ounce of her power. I don't agree. I don't agree at all. Yes, she's nose-heavy, too, but I think the thrust at the stern will counteract it. That's not our worry; despite what Chandler says, it's not our worry. You might have noticed the perfection of her lines, barrel-like from the stern admittedly, but over all she has the lines of a tremendous missile. Aerodynamically, she's very, very good indeed. *Arion*'s problem is not lack of power, but too much power. I'm certain she'll attain a far greater speed than they expect and that's going to put them into dreadful trouble. They don't want a seaman at the wheel, they want an airman, but I defy any airman to handle her. She can't be handled, not at full power. She's too large for her control surfaces. If Chant had built her to the specifications of a flying-boat he might have scraped home by the skin of his teeth. His fatal mistake was to build her as a ship. I'm very much afraid that when they open the throttles *Arion* will destroy herself. She may go mad. She may dive in. She may break her back. I don't know precisely what, but something's got to happen."

"And you consider," said Alan, "that this is an original discovery, not seen by anyone until you spotted it?"

"Far from it, and that's what troubles me."

"You're not inferring that Chant knows about this?"

Simon stopped in the centre of the room and for a few moments almost looked old. The lines in his face became deeply drawn.

"I do," he said. "Chant must know. The man who could conceive this ship could not possibly make such an error. The letters A-R-I-O-N do not spell the name of a ship, they spell *premeditated murder*. And one does not commit murder without a motive. That's what gets me. What is the motive? I suspected earlier that the structure of this A.P.M. Division was rotten to the core, but now I say it's a national scandal!"

CHAPTER TEN

SPIDER'S WEB

M^R BRIAN TOLLIS, radar officer of A.P.M. 1 *Arion*, was seated on his platform at the rear of the bridge. From where he sat he looked down over the officers of the watch; Skinner, the navigator, at his desk on the port side; Luff, the captain, in his chair on the starboard side and at present in conversation with the harbour pilot; Wesley, the first officer, dead centre at the controls; and the others—Scott and Chant and the three official observers representing the navy, the army, and the Department of Supply.

Wide and spacious was the bridge beneath its broad, lofty and gridded canopy of sparkling perspex. Here, all appointments were luxurious. Here, on the bridge, no expense had been spared to create the feeling of spaciousness, orderliness and efficiency. Perhaps elsewhere the finish of *Arion* was austere and stark, but not on the bridge. Here, everything was as its designer had intended it to be; elsewhere Scott's firm hand had forbidden the spending of a single shilling that was not necessary. If linoleum could replace carpet, linoleum had been used. If silver paint could replace chromium, silver paint had been used. If costly plywoods were not necessary, cheap alloy sheets had taken their place. Scott had been so miserly with funds that he stuffed the mattresses with straw instead of springs. On non-essentials, at least, not a penny had been wilfully wasted, yet this monster had consumed twelve million pounds.

Tollis knew all that. For twelve months now he had been with the A.P.M. Division, planning the radar and installing the ingenious system of closed television circuits which would enable the captain and the controlling officer to see outwards in all directions at once. The very nature of the bridge and the size of the vessel had made some form of visual aid necessary. Without his television, the captain would have been almost blind astern.

Tollis was very proud of his achievement, but he was far from being a happy man. The joy he had once believed this hour of sailing would hold for him had run cold. He was terrified because there were too many things he did not know and did not understand. Why should Scott be afraid of Simon Black? What did Scott have to hide? Why should the presence of these two government agents enrage Scott to the point of physical violence?

Tollis knew Simon Black although Simon hadn't recognized him. That was easy enough to understand. Tollis had been a member of Simon's squadron during the Second World War, but in those days he had been a small cog in the wheel, a corporal in the squadron's radar workshops. He had seen Simon often enough but had never met him man to man. Since then Tollis had slowly climbed the ladder, and when Scott had approached him to develop the electronic equipment for A.P.M. 1 *Arion*, he had jumped at the offer. The salary was exciting and the opportunity to create something worth while seemed limitless.

It was not until afterwards that Tollis had reflected upon his own skill and had been troubled by the realization that he could have named at least two dozen engineers who were better men than he would ever be. That he had overcome his sense of inferiority and had delivered the goods was due to his own determination and nothing else. It was not due to any hidden brilliance that Scott may have seen in him, because no one else had seen that brilliance, or suspected it, least of all Tollis himself.

As the months had progressed Tollis had made the discovery that all other specialists on the project were in the same class as himself—competent, but not outstanding. The single star of genius was the remote and unapproachable Dr Ross Chant. All the others were plodders, just average men, struggling to excel themselves and almost worshipping Scott for having given them the chance of their lives. Tollis had felt exactly the same way about it. His loyalty to Scott had almost touched devotion. Through all the accidents and troubles of the final months, the team of specialists had come to owe more and more to Scott. They knew that many of the

accidents were due to their own personal errors, but Scott had always protected them, always by mentioning the magic word "sabotage". Not by admitting sabotage, not even by suggesting it, but simply by denying that it could have happened. It was very cunning. Tollis was sure, too, that the myth of the jinx had come from Scott. Tollis was sure that Scott had carefully planted it in Chant's mind and then at once proceeded to dismiss all talk of it as nonsense.

It must have taken Brian Tollis more than eleven months to wake up to the danger. He had been so deeply involved in the problems of his work that he had not guessed what was going on around him; neither had the others. Tollis had not guessed that Scott, with great cunning, had made himself into a god. But Tollis did wake up, where the others didn't, and the awakening was a dreadful shock. Suddenly all the little things seemed to fit together. One night he had gone to bed a free man even if a blind one, but in the morning he could see and he had known he was a slave. In the cold, grey light of that particular morning he had suddenly seen himself for what he was—a helpless fly in Scott's web, trapped by deceit and dishonesty. He knew it, but didn't understand why it had happened and he wasn't man enough to try to break free. He was too frightened. He was afraid of scandal and of what it would do to the lives of his wife and his three young sons.

That was the story of Brian Tollis until Simon Black had come back into his world thirty-two hours ago. Thirty-two hours ago Simon Black and Alan Grant had stood beside a table in a conference room and almost frightened the life out of him, had convinced him beyond the last doubt that Scott was a rogue who was using the A.P.M. Division for some devilish purpose and that every member of the division, including himself, was a party to it, either wittingly or unwittingly.

Simon Black had called Scott a liar, and a liar Scott was. Scott had poisoned their minds against the Wing Commander by calling him a trouble-maker and a snooper, by accusing him of professional jealousy, by stating that he had tried for months to bring *Arion* into disrepute because it threatened the

supremacy of his own aircraft, by telling them that Simon Black was *Arion's* arch-enemy.

Scott had blinded everyone except Tollis. The others still trusted Scott, still believed him, still worshipped him, but Tollis was terrified. He was terrified because he had discovered the inside story of dishonesty and deceit. He knew that Scott had surrounded himself with men who were too weak or too indebted or too stupid to break free. He was terrified because Simon's threat to break the A.P.M. Division had, to all the others present, proved Scott's words, whereas it had really been directed at the rottenness in the division. That threat of Simon's to break A.P.M. had been a tragic tactical mistake, or so Tollis believed.

What had occurred on the dockside that morning, Tollis did not know. All he knew for certain was that Simon Black and Alan Grant had come aboard, despite Scott's vow that they wouldn't. He knew they were aboard, somewhere, but he also knew that apart from himself they were friendless. He couldn't understand why they had failed to join the officers for meals, why they had not come at any time to the bridge. If Tollis had not been so afraid for himself he would have asked, but he dared not reveal the slightest interest in their fate. He knew, too, that Scott's poison tongue had already turned the unsuspecting official observers against the two airmen. He had listened, sickened by Scott's recital of lies—sickened and frightened, for there had to be a reason, but the nature of the reason was a complete mystery. Scott, the spider, had them all in the web and there was no escape.

Every scientist, every engineer, every officer aboard, including the captain, would jump to Scott's bidding. He held them in his hand. The crew didn't count. They were seamen and had to obey their officers without question or be guilty of mutiny.

Tollis sat on his radar platform, trembling, watching the advance of the clock with dread, seeing in the television screens the approach of the two tugs which would tow *Arion* out through the boom into open bay, towards her proving or her ultimate undoing.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DEVIL SHIP

AT 11.25 p.m. by Simon's watch they felt *Arion* lurch, and Rex, stretched flat on the hard floor, raised an inquisitive head.

"Tugs?" queried Alan.

"I should think so. I doubt if they'll move her under her own power until she's through the boom."

"The engines are running!"

Simon raised an eyebrow. "By gad, so they are! I hadn't noticed."

"She's quiet. Very smooth. Very good."

"Yes."

"Of course, she'd need to be at this stage."

"Quite right. We're in enough trouble without her misbehaving at the dockside. That'll be the engine that drives the screws, Alan. Won't switch over to main power until we're through the heads. She's strictly a run-of-the-mill ship until she hits the ocean."

"So we're reasonably safe for the next five hours or so?"

"Probably, unless she's completely unseaworthy. The only complication at this stage is the tail fin. It's as tall as a city building. Too tall. Too much. She's going to roll. She'll catch every breath of wind." Simon shuddered. "How's your stomach? Good and strong?"

"It's flat and empty. I don't know about good and strong."

"The more I think about it, Alan, the more I'm convinced that this should be an aircraft, not a ship. Chant's crossed his wires somewhere. I'm with Sir Toby all the way. What *could* the navy do with her? I'm sure a seaman won't be able to handle her. She's too flat-bottomed even with the counter-weight lowered—not enough draught. With that tail fin stuck up there like an enormous mainsail she's going to weathercock with every gust of wind. And they can't set that fin as a yachtsman can set his sail. It's rigid. Locked. She'll be

tough on the water, this baby, at slow speed. Luff's going to have his hands full."

Alan raised a forefinger in a gesture of sudden alertness. "We're moving."

Simon glanced at his watch. "Eleven thirty. Yes, we're on the way. Good."

"I don't know what's good about it."

Simon dug a hand inside his uniform, unbuttoned the inner flap and withdrew the thin envelope that Mac had given him. "Our orders," he said. "Let's take a look at them."

Dr Ross Chant stood tensely on the bridge, his face drawn, as *Arion*, held now between the two tugs, one starboard and one port, moved slowly away from the dock towards the open boom.

They had shut off all major lights. The bridge was a gloomy vault, illuminated only by the glow of television screens and instruments and the one spot directed onto the ship's log, where Skinner, the navigator, recorded the act of departure and the hour.

Chant indeed was tense, for this event, though real, was still unbelievable. This creation of his genius, with all its faults and all its virtues, had finally begun its fateful maiden voyage. Chant knew it would be fateful. This child of his brain, this awful fulfilment of his great dream, had become a monster. The very fulfilment of the dream had created the monster. *Arion* was a devil ship.

Chant was not insane. His sanity was the coldest, the most deliberate, the most calculated of anyone's. Chant knew what he was doing. He certainly had not known at the beginning, but he knew now. Chant was deliberately going to his death and he was deliberately taking with him almost everyone who had helped him to form the monster. With heartbroken genius Chant had devised this monster for one purpose alone. He had devised it to destroy itself so completely, so disastrously, that neither it nor anything like it would ever be built again.

The glorious dream of the beginning had not hinted at this

SIMON BLACK AT SEA

end, but Chant had seen that first noble creation of his degenerate, day by day, week by week, from a ship of peace to a weapon of war. His great ocean liner was first conceived to draw the peoples of the world closer and closer together, to defeat the storms and gales and treachery of the sea, to bring complete safety to the voyager, to overcome the limitations and discomforts of the airliner, to speed trade between the nations, and to carry huge cargoes of fresh food swiftly to countries in need. That had been Chant's dream, but they had changed his ocean liner into a ship of war. He had produced the plan in innocence, but they had taken it and pushed it here and pushed it there and produced a fearsome thing. Once the process had started he couldn't stop it. They hadn't changed the shape of his ship, but they had changed her insides. Where he had planned a cargo hold they demanded a magazine. Where he had planned a promenade deck they had demanded a battery of weapons. Where he had planned an observation lounge high in the tail fin they demanded a gun-control platform. He had to go back to the drawing board to rebalance the ship, to measure her up to the new specifications, to change this feature and that feature, to fill her up with missiles and torpedoes and to increase her power and radius of action. He had done all that and more. He had changed his ship into an instrument of destruction in the fullest sense of the term.

It would have been easier for Chant if he had been insane. He would not have been faced by this awful complication at the eleventh hour—the need to remove Simon Black and Alan Grant and the official observers without harming them, the need to get them off his ship in safety, but sufficiently far from land to prevent their raising an alarm before *Arion* destroyed herself.

Time was so desperately short. In five hours and twenty minutes from this moment, *Arion* would be no more.

Simon broke the seal on the envelope and withdrew from it two sheets of flimsy paper. They bore the letterhead of the Prime Minister's Lodge, Canberra.

Simon glanced over the handwritten letter with astonish-

ment and then slowly, deliberately, read the contents to Alan.

"My dear friends—You have been asked not to read this until *Arion* sails. These things I tell you must influence your feelings towards the personnel of the A.P.M. Division, and if they were known to you before sailing you might have found it difficult to strike up a friendly relationship—"

"My sainted aunt!" interrupted Alan. "He didn't guess the half of it."

Simon went on reading:

"Mac's briefing was not correct. Certain facts were distorted or withheld from you on my instructions.

"(1) For eighteen months the immensely wealthy and powerful industrial group in western Europe known as Gervinus has been exerting tremendous pressure on me by fair means and foul to give them exclusive licence to develop *Arion*. I have refused to negotiate the matter or discuss it, but Gervinus knows so much about *Arion* that there must have been a leakage of information from A.P.M.

"(2) The loyalty of every member of A.P.M. is suspect. We can prove nothing. We can trace no connection with Gervinus, but there must be a connection.

"(3) We suspect that some members of A.P.M. for personal gain, have conspired with Gervinus to deliver up *Arion* or its secrets during the course of this voyage. Be ever alert for the safety of your own persons. Spend every moment possible on the bridge. In your conversations with the officers exercise the utmost care. I am certain, however, that Ross Chant's integrity is above suspicion, but he is too much a man of peace to be relied upon in a fight.

"(4) You may ask why has *Arion* been ordered to sea. Simply to give them the inch that will tempt them to take the mile. We want this plot exposed. It is intolerable that a foreign group of industrialists should be able to or should attempt to corrupt a government department. Perhaps they have not done so, but the evidence is to the contrary. There-

fore we expect from you the final evidence we need to place before the International Court and we expect you to conduct *Arion* safely to port.

"(5) Squadron Leader Grant is to contrive to keep an independent log of *Arion's* course, speed and position at all times.

"(6) Wing Commander Black is to be ever ready to assume command by force.

"Good luck. Sincerely yours, Jeffrey Ames, Prime Minister."

To a degree, *Arion's* sailing was secret. The fact was known by the senior officers of the three fighting services, and by various members of the government, some dockyard employees, harbour authorities, Australian embassies overseas, and one sharp-eyed fisherman.

The amateur fisherman, whose name is of no particular importance, was drifting to the east of the main channel in the trim new launch that his thirteen-year-old son had christened Firefly 3. The amateur fisherman was not fussy whether he caught anything or not. He sought mainly to escape for a few hours from the anxieties of business life to the peace and soothing motion of a starlit sea.

He saw *Arion's* navigation lights approaching and was mystified by their position in relation to the water. Port and starboard lights were so far apart, and the appearance of a third light, a white one, at a surprising height, seemed to imply that the vessel was of tremendous size, but he couldn't bring himself to believe it. Except for the navigation lights he would not have known a ship was there at all. There was no engine sound and there were no voices. Beyond the slapping of water against the hull of his launch and the feel of the breeze against his face, there was a vast stillness.

The fisherman's anxiety compelled him to start his engine and move away, and he saw then, silhouetted against the skyline glow from the distant city, an extraordinary sight, a towering wedge-shaped object standing erect above the water like an extended hand. From the movement of the white

light at the top he knew it was swaying back and forth. He had never seen a ship roll like it—if it was a ship.

The fisherman didn't really know what it was. He stared, spellbound.

On the bridge of *Arion* a totally unexpected condition was developing. It even caught Chant by surprise. The weather forecast was in every way satisfactory. The sea was slight and the breeze at force 4 was blowing from the west. Local weather conditions were, in fact, in sharp contrast with those several thousand miles to the north-east in the Pacific, where fierce storms raged. In the vicinity of the Eilice Islands, Hurricane Gertie was causing widespread damage, and although it lay in the path of *Arion*, it would be far away before *Arion* reached the area. Hurricane Gertie was not a worry and it is doubtful whether any man on the bridge gave it more than a passing thought; and it is certain that forty minutes after leaving the dockside only two or three men on the bridge were capable of thinking at all.

Arion's motion was fantastic.

She rolled like a tub on the wind and the swell, and neither Lieutenant-Commander Wesley nor Luff could control her. It was extremely difficult to keep the ship on course into the south. She continually tried to swing her tail into the wind as Simon had predicted she would. She simply didn't have the control surfaces to counteract this movement. A flying-boat had engines in its wings and a pilot could prevent weather-cocking on the water by increasing power on one side. *Arion* did not have engines in her wings and Chant had been convinced that she would not need them. He had been certain that the traction of the screws in the water would have made weathercocking impossible and it had done so with scale models, but a scaled-down model was not the same thing. Even Don Chandler had said that A.P.M. had made a fatal mistake by excluding practical flying men from its staff. This was something that an experienced pilot could have foreseen. The result was something that swept through *Arion* like a plague. Seasickness!

Chant was very, very ill, and they had to carry him to

his cabin. He was too ill to advise Luff and Wesley, too ill to care, too ill to worry about anything or anybody.

On the bridge only the experienced seamen remained capable—Luff, Wesley and the wireless officer, Lieutenant Gaffney. The harbour pilot, whose duties had taken him aboard a wider variety of vessels than most people even knew existed, was uncomfortable and alarmed.

"Listen to me, Commander," he said. "Don't blind yourself to facts. This is highly dangerous. How is she going to behave in a blow?"

"She'll be airborne in a blow. The situation won't arise."

"Surely you can do something. There must be some method of stabilizing the ship. By the time you reach the heads you'll be lucky if there's a single crew member on his feet. Between you and me, Commander, I'd be hanged before I'd take this thing to sea. Get her outside the bay into the ocean swell and she'll be on her back. You'll never hold her. If you won't speak to Scott, I will."

"No good speaking to Mr Scott. He's as sick as a dog."

"So he is. And so's your radar man and your navigator, half the crew, the official observers. Don't you understand, Commander, that the bay is almost *calm*?"

"There's a force 4 wind."

"So what! She shouldn't feel it. She should sit as still as a rock. She's not seaworthy. If you take this ship through the heads you'll be guilty of the murder of every man aboard her and I won't keep quiet. I've got a tongue in my head and the good Lord gave it to me to use. Twelve million quid for this! It's an outrage."

Luff wouldn't argue any more. He heard the voice beating against him, but he didn't listen to the words. He was too scared to listen, because every earlier word had struck home. He was frightened, felt helpless, couldn't understand it. He knew it was dangerous. He knew it was murder. This infernal ship rolled like a corvette in an Atlantic gale; it rolled frantically on a sea which would have scarcely disturbed a rowing-boat. That he would be deprived of the advice of Scott and Chant was something that had never entered his mind. That most of his officers would be violently ill, that the

bulk of his crew would be useless, had never occurred to him.

Arion had excited Luff. He had not been frightened of it; not until now.

Alan was sadly conscious of his stomach. He had never been airsick, never been seasick, but he was certain that his present condition was touch and go. He felt frightful and sat at the table, with both hands gripping its edge, almost too scared to breathe. It wasn't funny. It was awful.

Simon was on his feet, pacing back and forth across the cell, caged, angry, beating his right fist into the palm of his left hand, not oblivious of the motion of the ship. but taking it in his stride, predicting the roll as easily as he could predict the swing of a pendulum. That's how it was. Like a pendulum. Backwards and forwards. Backwards and forwards.

"What's wrong with them?" he fumed. "What's wrong with the fools? Can't they sail their own ship?"

"No," said Alan, briefly and breathlessly.

"Are they trying to destroy her? Thunder, you'd think so! They're absolutely clueless. I said before a seaman couldn't handle her and I say it again. You agree?"

"Yes," choked Alan obediently.

"I knew she'd roll. I said she'd roll. But I didn't say she'd do this, and I'll swear that I could stop it in a minute. We've got to get out of here, Alan. We've got to get up to the bridge."

Alan groaned.

"Even if we beat the door down. What we want is a tool. Something to force it. She's not built like a battleship. She's not steel. If we get enough force on that door it's got to give."

Alan was sure he was turning green and dug his fingers into the table edge.

"Steel," growled Simon. "I want a piece of steel. My kingdom for a tire lever!"

He examined the door from top to bottom but it opened inwards, not outwards, and they would never beat it down with brute force, and they would never force a lever in anywhere. It was too tight a fit.

"There must be a way. Thunder, I refuse to be beaten by a miserable door!"

"Is there a lock?"

"Not that I can see. There's probably a simple lever on the outside. Can't even put a bullet through it. If we can't find the lock we can't shoot it."

Simon took a look at the butt ends of the hinges. They projected about a quarter of an inch beyond the face of the door. With a hacksaw he could have cut through them. With a hammer he might have been able to smash them, but he had nothing.

He stopped pacing, thrust his hands onto his hips, and swayed against the motion of the ship. "Hah!" he barked. "The Prime Minister reads us the Riot Act, but don't rely on Chant, he says, if it comes to a fight. Take command by force, he says, if we have to. HAH!"

Alan picked himself up and staggered round Rex to the nearest bunk and eased himself onto it and was perfectly certain he wanted to die.

Simon's sympathies for Alan were lost in the worries and demands of duty. He turned his eyes back to the door again.

"We're not stumped," he growled. "I refuse to be stumped. I'll get through there if it's the last thing I ever do!"

Lieutenant-Commander Ambrose Wesley, R.A.N., at the controls, called Luff away from his painful conversation with the harbour pilot.

"Frank."

"Yes," said Luff.

"I don't feel well."

Luff stiffened inwardly but made no comment. He couldn't trust himself to say the right words, because what were the right words?

Wesley's face had turned a bad colour. "You've got to make a decision, Frank. We can't go on."

"We've got to go on. You know what it means if we fail."

"Not if we fail. We have failed. I can't control her. You can't control her. What's going to happen on the open sea? She'll turn turtle. Something's fundamentally wrong with a

ship that behaves like this on comparatively calm water. I know that's not a very profound observation, but it's the truth and we've got to face it. We've got to face it before I'm laid out. I'm sick, I tell you. I feel dreadful. Look here, Frank, you've got to face it!"

Luff didn't know what to do. He couldn't think constructively because he knew in his heart that this was not a ship at all. Any sort of a ship responded to ship's controls. *Arion* didn't. *Arion* had a will of her own and she would not be subdued. Of course a ship had to have spirit, but she had to be obedient. Her eagerness to get up and go had to be subject to the man at the wheel. Luff groaned. "I don't know. I feel helpless."

"We've known each other for a long time, Frank. We understand each other. I'm not judging you. I'm pleading with you. Heave to. Let me turn her into the wind. We've got to have a breathing space. I've sailed the seas for twenty-five years but I haven't been sick more than two or three times. I've got to have a breathing space or I'll be ruined."

Luff groaned again. "If we heave to, we're beaten. We'll be admitting it."

"I've admitted it already."

Luff called the engine-room. "How's everyone down there?"

The report from the engine-room showed that the situation there was not any more encouraging than on the bridge. Not one man was a hundred per cent fit.

Luff sighed. "All right. Heave to."

Radar Officer Brian Tollis eased his trembling body upright from the hard flat surface of his bunk. The torturous motion of this devil ship, *Arion*, had quietened and the faint vibration from the engine-room below had ceased entirely. Everything was very hushed and almost immobile. Tollis could still feel the sea but the movement was gentle now; still there, still worrying him a little, but he was sure he could get back to the bridge.

Tollis was dismayed by his bout of seasickness. He had disgraced himself in his own eyes and in the eyes of others. He

had forgotten that a ship at sea was not as steady a platform as a ship in dock. He was determined now to fight this nausea off, to stiffen himself against the weakness of his body and the weakness of his will. He half believed he had succumbed to seasickness because he was afraid to face the future. He didn't know that five out of every six men aboard were affected in the same manner.

By the time Tolls reached the bridge he knew that the engines had stopped and that *Arion* was standing into the wind. He could sense trouble and he could see it in the few faces about him. He was astonished by the fact that only half the officers of the watch were there and that most of those present looked every bit as green as he felt. Only Luff and the harbour pilot were really steady on their feet. Tolls didn't realize it for a moment, but he had walked into a major argument. The silence he met was only brief, an angry pause in an angry exchange.

He almost crawled to his platform and slumped into his chair and peered down into the faces of the television screens beyond the controls. The screens told him very, very little. *Arion* was at sea but nothing was visible except a few isolated lights.

He stared into the screens with a certain limpness of spirit and turned his attention then to his own radar, thankful that he had no part in the argument.

Perhaps if the harbour pilot had not been aboard Luff would have accepted the facts as they were and turned back for home, but fear or pride was stiffening his resolve to go on. He must have known that *Arion* was unmanageable, but he refused to admit it to the pilot. Everything that the pilot said was sound common sense, but Luff was afraid to think for himself beyond the rigid briefing that Scott had hammered into him. Scott had said that *Arion* had to succeed and had asked who, if she did not succeed, could be more to blame than her captain. *Arion* was perfect, Scott had said, and if her performance fell anything short of perfection, it would be due only to the stupidity of her crew. Only by the crew's failing to understand her could *Arion's* voyage be anything less than a triumph.

Those words preyed on Luff. He knew that this voyage was his chance for glory or disgrace. *Arion's* failure would be his own failure. He would never rise above it again for as long as he lived. He could step off this ship at Pearl Harbour a famous man or a laughing-stock. It was up to him, because Scott had said it was up to him. Poor Luff was between the devil and the deep blue sea, and *Arion* was the devil.

Yet Luff was sure that given a little more time he could modify his interpretation of engine power and controls and hold the ship steady; but he knew that the major peril lay in the possibility that he might not master the ship before she reached the ocean. He had to master her before then or *Arion* might founder, and he admitted that to the pilot. He admitted the possibility but as captain demanded the right to try to control his ship.

Scott's arrival on the bridge was not noticed at first. He stood at the rear, drooping, supporting himself against the door-frame, his normally florid complexion a ghastly yellow. Scott didn't look impressive at all. He looked like a sick old man. "Frank," he said weakly.

Scott's appearance was beautifully timed. Perhaps the timing was accidental but it couldn't have come at a better moment for Luff.

"What's the trouble, Frank? Why have you stopped?"

"I couldn't go on. Everyone was sick."

"Really! And since when have captains been obliged to heave to because a few people like myself are poor sailors?"

"That's not the point," barked the harbour pilot. "The vessel's not safe."

"Stuff and nonsense. Has the captain said it's not safe?"

"He's admitted that it might not be."

Scott turned to Luff again. "A rash statement, Frank. You shouldn't have said it because nothing could be more untrue. We are not here to disprove *Arion*. We are here to prove it."

"You can't prove it," thundered the pilot, "with more than eighty per cent of your crew scared stiff or ill."

"I suspect that you are taking a few liberties, sir," growled Scott, "first by expressing your opinions whatever they may

be and secondly by accusing the crew of cowardice merely because you are frightened yourself."

Tollis interrupted with a crispness in his voice that he certainly didn't feel. "Radar to Captain. A small vessel is bearing fifteen degrees starboard at five hundred yards. It has been present for some time and is drawing closer. If you view number 2 screen you will observe its lights. It is probably a launch."

"Thank you, Mr Tollis." Luff moved to the screen to verify the report and thus the decision to go on was made for him. Scott's prodding and the nearness of that pop-eyed amateur fisherman should not have affected his judgment at all, but at that moment both seemed very important.

Luff, in fact, took the coward's way out. He called the engine-room and directed Wesley to resume course.

Luff should have obeyed the dictates of his own heart and conscience. He should have returned to port.

CHAPTER TWELVE

PRISONERS

“**A**RION” wallowed on down the bay towards the distant ocean, manned by a skeleton crew. From end to end her decks and bunks were strewn with suffering men. All the medical staff, except one orderly, were disabled too, and could not help. That one orderly, a young medical student on vacation from the university, gradually worked over the length of the ship, from deck to deck, dispensing cheerful words and little black pills that were designed not to cure seasickness but to prevent it. It was a case of closing the stable door after the horse had bolted.

On the bridge Wesley and Luff did everything within their power and knowledge to dampen the rolling of the ship but were unable to do so. They tried every possible combination of controls, and every speed from dead slow up to nearly fourteen knots without avail. It was not until nearly 3 a.m., when the channel itself, following the sweep of the bay, turned from a southerly heading to a westerly heading, that they achieved anything. Once they were heading into wind at about twelve knots the ship at last became stable. At speeds slower than twelve knots she still rolled, and at speeds above twelve knots she began to pitch. *Arion's* margin of safety and comfort was indeed very, very slender.

Squadron Leader Alan Grant, D.F.C., struggled from a haze of sleep and discomfort into a peculiar world which seemed to revolve around a bare electric light globe. Nothing made sense for fifteen or twenty seconds, until that beastly light bulb finally took its rightful place on the ceiling and the rest of the drab room dug in its hooks and stayed put. That was how it seemed to Alan anyway. As he sat up everything fell into focus. There was Rex still asleep on the floor, flat out like a lizard, and there was Simon, still at the little

bolted-down table in the centre of the cell, still straddling his stool, with his chin cupped in his hands.

Simon was motionless, apparently staring at the door which had beaten him, which was still shut tightly. His eyes were half closed and dull. Probably he was more asleep than awake. He must have been very, very tired.

Alan raised his left wrist into the light and peered at his watch. It was 4.35.

That meant more than five hours had passed since *Arion* had left the dockside. Five hours. The Prime Minister had instructed Alan to keep an independent log of the ship's course and position at all times. Naturally the Prime Minister had not been able to foresee the nature of events. He had not been able to foresee that his instructions would pose an impossible problem.

"Simon!"

"Yeah?"

"Awake?"

"More or less," sighed Simon. "How do you feel?"

"Much better."

"Good."

"Where are we?"

Simon grunted. "I dunno. Too tired to think. I suppose we're near the heads. I can feel the ocean swell. The long roll."

"But she's reasonably stable."

"Has been for some time, Alan. Perhaps they've tamed her. Perhaps they're merely tracking into the wind. We'll find out soon enough."

Alan carefully put his feet to the deck and walked slowly to the table. "I think I'm over the worst of it," he said. "Thank heaven!"

Simon grunted. "Have you been seasick before?"

"Never."

"Mmm. Then perhaps you're not the only one. . . . It's infuriating, this business. Not knowing what's going on."

"We'll have to get used to it."

"We'll have to do no such thing. We're getting out of here."

"How?"

"As soon as you're strong enough we're going to smash the door. Break it down."

"Is that the best you can do?"

Simon shrugged. "There's no other method. I don't like breaking the furniture, but there you are. It's the furniture or us."

"And what are you going to use as a battering ram? Your head?"

"I'm going to use a bunk."

Alan turned slowly on his heel and regarded the beds. The lower bunk on the left was already stripped. The straw mattress and blankets were thrown aside and the base of the bunk, an alloy frame reinforced with wire mesh, had been dragged clear and placed on the floor.

"I see," said Alan. "And you think that will do the job?"

"There's a good way of finding out."

"Granted," said Alan. "There's one excellent method; but before we begin I suggest that we decide now what we're to do when we get out. I doubt if we're going to get very far; not with fifty men arrayed against us."

"That's a bridge we can cross when we reach it, but we know the lay-out of the ship. We know where everything is. We know the good spots to hide, the spots to avoid, and the way up to the bridge. And added to everything else they're frightened of us. I'd say the advantage was not theirs, but ours."

"And I'd say you need your head read."

"You've been saying that for years. . . . Right; get a good strong arm on that bed. I'll take the front; you take the back; and we'll swing in rhythm. Something's got to give."

"Even if it's only us."

They turned the bed-frame on edge lengthwise and Rex stirred himself sufficiently to open one weary eye and remove himself from the middle of the room to the side.

"We'll aim slightly to the right of centre. The idea is not to smash it completely, but to punch a hole through it."

"And we wriggle out through the hole, huh?"

"No. I put my arm through and turn the latch."

"Oh," said Alan. "Very well. Let's go!"

They swung, backwards and forwards, once, twice, and on the third swing rammed with all their might. They dented it and jarred every bone in their bodies, but they didn't break through.

Alan grunted. "What we need is a good feed."

"What we want is a hole through that door. Come on."

Back into the rhythm again and on the third swing they again slammed the bed into the door and placed a second dent two inches to the right of the first dent, again jarred themselves to the roots of their teeth, and again failed to move the door or penetrate it.

"Tough," said Alan.

"Mmm. Keep at it."

They swung again and again and again, until it was the bed-frame that gave, not the door. It snapped at diagonally opposite corners and collapsed. Their heads were sore from repeated shock but the door remained as immovable as Gibraltar.

Simon staggered back to his stool in disgust and sighed. "Rotten thing."

"There are three more bunks to go."

Simon shook his head. "The door's too solid. It's obviously packed with insulating material. It's not hollow. We're wasting our time, Alan. We're prisoners."

It was off the town of Queenscliff that the pilot boat came alongside and the still protesting pilot made his last stand and delivered his final threat. "Are you going through with it, Commander?"

"Naturally," said Luff.

"Don't deceive yourself that you've mastered your ship. You've been heading into wind, more or less, for the last couple of hours. As soon as you're clear of the heads and on the open sea you're going to wish you'd never been born. You won't be able to control her. You'll turn turtle."

"I will be delighted to prove you wrong, sir."

"You'd better, because if you don't I'll break you, Commander. If this ship comes to grief and if you have the mis-

fortune to survive, I'll have you on a murder charge. So help me, I will."

The pilot departed then. Soon the boat drew away into the grey gloom of early morning and Commander Frank Luff was alone with his frightful responsibility. His officers may have been beside him, his crew may have been about him, but the appalling dangers of the next hour were charged to his account. Perhaps every man shared the peril but Luff alone bore the responsibility.

He again increased speed to twelve knots and moved *Arion* south-west, down between the cliffs of the opposing shores into the teeth of the strong current produced where the vast ocean swept through the narrow mouth of the bay. She rode the current well, as she had done for the past hour or more, but he still had the wind almost dead ahead and the very wind that had threatened disaster before was now the power that held him straight. But Luff was not deceived. Far from it. He knew the time would come very soon when he would have to swing the wind on to his beam and it would strike the huge surface of the tail fin. The thought almost froze him. He didn't know how he was going to counteract it. He didn't know what he was going to do. But he did know that somehow he had to drive this ship on, out of sight of land, before he dared bring the huge compressors into operation. The air blast from those compressors would increase his speed threefold or more and finally, perhaps, lift this monstrous thing from the surface of the sea into the air. But he had to get that far first. He had to survive until he was out of sight of land. Whether he would survive beyond that time was an entirely different thing. The problem of becoming airborne was the one danger he had accepted in advance.

For some reason unknown to him he then thought of Simon Black. The continued absence of that meddlesome fellow was mystifying. He was not in the least anxious to see Simon Black or to hear from him, but where in tarnation had the man hidden himself? That he had made not the slightest attempt to interfere was strange indeed. He had stepped aboard the ship and vanished. Neither Black nor Grant nor the dog had crossed his path once.

Luff wondered about that. He wondered whether it was a good thing or a bad thing.

Scott was wondering about it, too, at that same moment. Scott was on the bridge, seated next to the navigator, suffering in silence, continually aware that he balanced on the borderline of seasickness, so aware of it that he was afraid to move or speak.

Scott was badly frightened and not only by the peculiar behaviour of *Arion*. Simon Black had him frightened. This was the last thing he had expected. This ominous silence was far more nerve-racking than the actual presence of the man himself. Black was undoubtedly up to something. If *Arion* had acquitted herself well on the Bay Scott would not have been deeply concerned, but *Arion's* performance had been so extremely bad that Black surely must be making some move to prevent her from continuing.

That was something that must not happen. Scott had to get this ship into the Pacific. Years of work and worry and deception and almost crushing responsibility had been directed towards that one end. There was a certain spot on the map in the centre of the Pacific that was Scott's target and *Arion* had to get there. Until these last few dreadful hours of darkness Scott had been sure that that would be the easiest part of his tremendous task. He had been sure that once the ship was at sea his worries would be over. Even allowing for Black and Grant, whose coming aboard he had resisted so strenuously, he had been sure that his ingenious plan could not fail. To bring the plan to its present stage he had risked everything—his position, his reputation, his career, his entire future, even his life—but this ship that he had used for his own ends was herself threatening to wreck everything. Already Scott was afraid that she would sink before she flew.

It was Skinner, the navigator, seated beside him, who broke into his thoughts.

"Navigator to Captain," said Skinner. "Prepare to alter course to 200 degrees compass."

That was the southerly heading that Luff feared so much.

That was the course that would again put the wind onto their beam.

Luff's anxious eyes at once turned to Scott. "That'll put us cross wind."

Scott nodded.

"Perhaps," said Luff, "we should get Dr Chant up onto the bridge. I think he should be here. This time we'll have the ocean swell as well as the wind. Will I send for him?"

Scott sighed. "Do that."

Ross Chant knew that he had to get off his bunk and somehow struggle down to C Deck to release Simon Black and Alan Grant. He had known it for an hour or more, but his will had not been strong enough to rise above the awful limpness of his body. He had retched until his stomach was raw. His head ached until he scarcely knew how to bear the pain. Even his eyes were as hard as stones. They felt bruised and blinded. No matter how often he tried or how hard, he couldn't bring himself to slide over the edge to the deck. He knew he'd never walk. He even wondered whether he could crawl.

He had no idea of time. He didn't know where the ship was and to think constructively was beyond him. The thoughts he had were fragmentary and the only direction his mind could give him was this urge, this urgent prodding, to reach Simon Black before it was too late, to order him off the ship or to get him off somehow before *Arion* reached her zero hour and destroyed herself. But he couldn't get off the bunk. He couldn't.

When he felt the hand on his shoulder and heard the voice addressing him it taxed him severely to hear distinctly and to understand.

"Doctor . . . Doctor. . . . The captain wants you on the bridge. Very important, sir. Very urgent."

The cabin light had been switched on and it hurt his eyes, but he realized at last that there was a seaman beside him.

"No," panted Chant. "I can't."

"The captain wants your advice, sir. He's got to sail across wind."

"No," panted Chant again. "Go away."

"You must try, sir. In a very short time we'll be making the take-off run. You don't want to miss that, sir. You couldn't miss your take-off run, sir. Not after all the years and all the work. Come on, sir; pull yourself together."

That got home to Chant; that got through all his physical and mental misery. "When?" he groaned.

"It's dawn, sir. The sun will be up in a few minutes. We're through the heads. We're out on the open sea. In about fifteen minutes, sir, the captain will be starting the compressors. But he wants you now, sir; not later. He needs your advice, sir. She's so difficult to control across wind. He *needs* you, sir."

The seaman didn't know what he was asking and if he could have read the half-crazed thoughts in poor Chant's mind he would have fled for his life.

"Let me help you, sir."

Chant weakly brushed the seaman's hands aside. "I'll come," he groaned. "Tell them I'll come."

"Let me help you, sir."

"No!"

Chant realized he was alone again and made a great effort. He rolled over the side of the bunk and crashed to the deck on his shoulder, jarring himself severely, punching all the breath from his body, and suffering the torments of the damned in his head. It was cruel, frightfully cruel, but this was a cross he had made for himself and he had to bear it.

He started crawling and every movement was agony; but time was so short.

Time was so terribly short.

"Navigator to Captain," said Skinner. "We must alter course now, sir, to 200 degrees compass."

Luff knew he was a coward; he knew he couldn't do it; he knew he didn't dare do it. "Navigator," he said breathlessly, "wouldn't it be possible to continue on the present course until land is out of sight?"

"I expect it's possible, sir; but it will take a very long time. We'll be running more or less parallel to the coast. The sooner you turn south the sooner you leave land behind."

Luff grunted. He couldn't forget the pilot's threat that if *Arion* sank and he should survive he'd be on a murder charge. It was an awful threat, because a pilot was not without influence. The opinions and accusations of that man would count for much.

"Get it over," growled Scott. "We're not heading for the Bight. We're heading for the Pacific."

"When Chant is here," said Luff. "Perhaps then, eh?"

"Perhaps now."

Luff groaned within himself. He was captain of this ship but he had been dominated by Scott for too long. Scott was his mother's brother. Scott had been the big strong uncle when Luff was only a little boy. It was very hard for Luff. If he had had any real strength of character, and real foresight, he would never have joined Scott's organization in the first place.

Luff spoke to Wesley without looking at him. He was too afraid to meet Wesley in the eye. "Alter course to 200 degrees compass."

Outside now sea and sky were visible. Not a cloud anywhere and the last of the stars were melting away. In the east the first faint flush of yellow was running along the horizon, but the vast sea was still a sombre grey, touched here and there with white, heaving.

Arion didn't want to turn out of the wind. As Wesley moved her round she continually sought to swing back again, and the first wide sweep of the tail fin, that enormous pendulum, had started. She dipped and swung, back and forth, and in fifteen seconds had begun to roll fantastically. Luff's hair almost stood on end.

Wesley glanced at him helplessly, not knowing what to do with the wheel and overcome by the despairing knowledge that the wheel simply was not enough. She needed more than rudder but that was all he could give her. He was as helpless as an oarsman without an oar, as a yachtsman without a sail, as a horseman without reins. He couldn't hold the ship in check without the means to do it. He had to fight the terrific pressure that was relayed from the rudder to the wheel and he couldn't engage the automatic controls until the ship was

stable first. He could hold it on course by applying hard port rudder and extra power on the port screws, but that didn't stop the roll.

"For pity's sake," wailed Wesley, "where's Chant? You must get him. Why isn't he here?"

"Chant!" thundered Luff. "Get him here if you have to drag him by the hair of his head."

Arion swayed like a drunken man and the horizon dipped back and forth with a sickening seesaw motion. Scott felt himself going again, and Tollis felt it, too, and throughout the ship men who had overcome their nausea were rapidly stricken again and disabled.

The temptation for Wesley to disobey orders was almost overpowering. He was mentally and physically terrified, not only for himself but for the life of every man aboard. Plain common sense told him that he had to turn *Arion* back into the direction of the wind, but his years of training as a naval officer exerted a force so strong that it even rose above terror. Every part of him cried out to turn her into the wind but the iron grip of self-discipline wouldn't let him do it.

Wesley suddenly heard the tense voice of a seaman addressing the captain. "Chant's gone, sir. He said he was coming here, but there's no sign of him. I can't find him anywhere."

"Find him," rasped Luff. "Search the ship, but find him, and for heaven's sake find him quickly. He designed this—this—MONSTROSITY—and he's got to answer for it!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MOMENT FOR DISASTER

ALAN steadied himself against his bunk, fighting a terrific personal battle, commanding himself not to be sick, hoping but not entirely believing that mind could master matter.

"We're on the open sea," barked Simon. "That's a certainty, but I don't know for how long. This can't last. I'm telling you, Alan—it can't last."

"I don't know that I want it to," groaned Alan.

"It seems," said Simon, "that the team up there on the bridge, two decks above us, were born without any brains and have steadily deteriorated ever since. I say once again, we've got to get out of here."

Simon made a dive for the upper bunk on the left-hand side and ripped the bedding off it. "It's the only method. We've just got to keep beating at it until it breaks."

He wrenched the base out of the bunk and slid it on its edge towards the door. "Come on, cripple. Stir your bones."

Alan moaned, released his hand hold and staggered across the floor, pitched forward by the roll of the ship. He came to a violent halt against the table and clung to it, only to slide down a leg of it to the deck, helplessly sick.

Simon had no choice but to try himself, to lift the frame of the bed and swing it savagely. He cracked it against the door, again and again, until he was breathless and almost as helpless as Alan. It was completely useless. He had no more chance of smashing through the door than flying like a bird. He couldn't even aim straight. *Arion* was pitching so wildly that three of his blows missed the door entirely and struck the wall.

Simon tossed the bed-frame away in anger and it skidded across the deck and clattered against the lavatory partition, so startling Rex that he must have leapt two feet into the air.

It was then that the door swung open, wide open, and a

pathetic heap of humanity crawled through the opening on its hands and knees.

Simon was so astonished that he could not move, not until the roll of the ship again acted on the door and threatened to slam it shut. Simon took off like a kangaroo. One gigantic bound carried him across the cell and he caught the closing edge of the door as it swung past their visitor's feet. He held onto it; then, trembling with surprise and excitement, he recognized Dr Ross Chant, but only by the beard. Chant was in an awful mess, almost sick to death.

Chant didn't crawl any farther. He stopped where he was, just inside the room, flat to the deck, with his head turned to one side, gulping desperately for air. Simon had vowed that when he saw Chant again he would stand him up against a wall and blacken his eyes; but he forgot his vow. Chant was in no condition for further punishment. Chant, in fact, was pitiable.



"Rex!"

The dog turned an alert eye on Simon.

"Rex! Bring me a blanket. There! On the floor. Bring it here!"

The dog dragged it to Simon, but Simon didn't use it on Chant. He held the end of it against the door-jamb and forced the door shut over it, after first having checked that the lock was disengaged. He then lifted Chant and carried him to Alan's bunk, arriving there with a great rush as the ship rolled to starboard.

"I'm ill, Black," the scientist said weakly.

"You're telling me."

"You must get off the ship. She's doomed."

"You can say that again, too."

"Don't argue with me, Black. I'm too weak. Too ill. I locked you up so that I could drop you off in the bay, but I was too ill. I'm your friend. Believe me. You must leave now."

"And swim ashore? Not on your life. . . . Why is she doomed, Chant?"

"She's no good. Devil ship. No good."

Simon got a firm grip on the scientist's shoulders. "Devil ship? Nonsense. There's nothing wrong with *Arion* that a little common sense won't fix. You know that. You know it, Chant. Why haven't you instructed the crew how to handle her? She needn't roll like this. It's ridiculous."

Chant groaned. "You don't know what you're saying. You don't understand her. I do. She's a devil."

"You're a nut, I know that much. A nut, or a madman, or a murderer." Simon suddenly barked at him. "Which is it? I know your ship from stem to stern. I know what she can do and what she can't do. Why, Chant? Why have you done it?"

"Go away. Get off her! GO!"

"I'll be hanged if I will, Dr Chant. You're up to no good, Dr Chant, and I want to know why. I've got my orders and I'm going to obey them."

Simon, in sudden anger, raised a fist and almost struck the man. Instead, he shook the fist at him. "You're a fool," he grated. "You should be horsewhipped."

Simon pulled back from the bunk and dropped on his knees beside Alan. "Alan, old boy. I'm going up top. I'm taking over by hook or by crook. I'm going to steady her down.

When she stops rolling about you'll feel better. Chant won't; so lock him up here and follow me. Got that?"

Alan nodded.

"I'll take Rex. I'm going to need him more than you do. Chin up, old son. You won't have to suffer for long."

Simon reached his cap down from his bunk, checked his revolver, and snapped the long leash to Rex's collar. "Okay, boy. Let's go."

The door opened to a firm tug on the blanket and Simon closed it again in the same manner, leaving a good long tail on the inside for Alan to pull.

The lay-out of the ship, as memorized from the plans, was vivid in Simon's mind. He had prepared for this moment of escape although he had feared it would not come. He knew precisely where to go and he went with long strides, on across the bows and down the starboard side, a total distance of eighty feet from the cell door, until he came to a steep companionway. With his left hand he rapped Rex on the rump and the dog took the steep flight of steps at a rush and Simon bounded up behind him to B Deck level.

All clear. Not a soul to be seen, but at last Simon was in daylight, and through the broad scenic-type windows that encircled this deck he saw ocean and sky, seemingly in violent motion, seemingly sweeping over his head and sweeping back again. But that was *Arion*. That was *Arion*'s perilous motion as she toppled first one way and then the other. To see the extent of that rolling was downright dismaying. Simon's heart almost failed him.

He sprang for the adjoining companionway that led up to A Deck and again drove Rex on before him until he came to the small landing that opened directly onto the bridge. Simon didn't hesitate. He opened the heavy door, stepped through, and energetically slammed it behind him.

Simon wouldn't forget that moment for as long as he lived. What he saw before him registered on his mind with the vividness of something seen by photographic flashlight. His appreciation of the beauty of that bridge, of the joy it was to the eye, was instantaneous. His appreciation of the human situation existing there was just as rapid, just as start-

ling. The bridge was a creation of law, order and efficiency, yet it provided the backdrop for a scene of human disorder, inefficiency and wretchedness. It was a scene of eight or nine men violently ill and two splendid fools at the wheel waging a hopeless battle against the ship and the elements.

Wesley and Luff were shoulder to shoulder at the wheel, both deathly pale, both streaming with the cold perspiration of fear, both desperately trying to do their duty although they knew they must destroy themselves.

What Simon did not realize was the effect his sudden entry had upon them. They saw him as a giant, immaculately uniformed, braced with legs astride, with rugged features chipped out of rock, and with a magnificent tawny-coloured dog straining on the end of a long leash. Simon didn't mean it that way but his appearance was theatrical. If he had studied his entry, if he had rehearsed it a thousand times, the effect could not have been greater. They didn't see him as a foe. They saw him as hope. They realized, too, that he only had to command and they would obey. They had been immune to the legend of Simon Black when Scott had taunted them and urged them and thought for them; but now that Scott was a quivering heap of flesh Simon Black assumed a stature in their eyes that he would never have laid claim to himself.

When he bellowed at them his voice was the voice of logic and authority. "Turn into the wind, you pair of fools!"

They had wanted to turn into the wind from the moment they had turned out of the wind, but their fear of failure had been greater than their fear of death. They had been ordered to steer south and they had been afraid to break the order; but this was another order, roared at them, commanding them to do what they actually wanted to do. Simon Black's appearance had been so perfectly timed. At any earlier moment they would have resisted him, but his appearance at this instant, they believed, was powerful evidence of his perfect strategy, of his complete command over the situation and over themselves.

They turned into the wind without question. They gave *Arion* her head and she did the rest herself. She slewed back

into the west, almost broadsided into the west, plunging, pitching, rolling like a cork.

"What's your most stable speed?" barked Simon.

"Twelve knots," stammered Luff.

"Right. Steer 280 at twelve knots."

"That'll take us back towards land!"

"I have eyes. I can see. Steer 280."

As the ship slowly stabilized, Simon advanced on the centre of the bridge, and his eyes passed from man to man, over every person and every station. He knew he had them in the palm of his hand, yet he knew he could lose them if he overplayed or underplayed his role. He knew that if he handled this situation with care and confidence and without error he could take command of *Arion* without the use of force. He was already conscious of the fact that the misguided Ross Chant, by imprisoning him, had done him a great service. Simon chose to see it as providential and not as the result of his own ability to turn defeat into triumph.

Simon paced the breadth of the bridge, back and forth, three times, retaining a firm grip on Rex's lead, and examining the instruments and installations that he had already seen in plans. He didn't utter a word for nearly four minutes. The purpose of his silence was twofold, to keep Luff and his men guessing and to form a personal appreciation of this, the nerve centre of a revolutionary means of transport. In those few minutes *Arion* steadied and Simon convinced himself that she was not a ship, not an aircraft. *Arion* was herself, a thing unique.

"Commander Luff," he finally said, "I have gained an impression in these last few hours that you've had a spot of bother."

Luff's was a brief and breathless reply. "Yes."

"You understand, I suppose, that this vessel of yours is a remarkable thing?"

"Yes."

"But perfectly safe. Perfectly."

"No."

"Yes, Commander. I submit that this vessel should sit on

the sea as steady, if not steadier, than the most modern stabilized liner afloat."

"Impossible."

"Not at all. You've got a gem in your hands. You're a fortunate man. Tell me, why aren't you sailing it as you should?"

"I've been sailing it the only way it can be sailed."

"You're not sailing it. You're abusing it. You're only fooling. You're not trying."

"Not trying? *Arion's* a comedy of errors. It's a catastrophe. I defy you to do any better."

Simon didn't smile, but that was what he had wanted, "Then it is in order if I demonstrate?"

Luff knew that he had lost command in that moment. Simon's voice was so calculated in tone, so demanding, and so certain of the reply his question would bring, that there was no other way out.

"Yes, demonstrate."

Simon turned his eyes on Wesley. "We met the other day, but I've forgotten your name."

Wesley reminded him.

"Very well, Mr Wesley; if you would be kind enough to step down."

Wesley stepped down and Simon took his place, and Rex took up his station beside him.

"Mr Luff," said Simon, "will you order the engine-room to start the compressors?"

Luff immediately showed panic. "No. No, you can't do that."

"And what's going to stop me?"

"We're not ready for the take-off run. If you will glance at the television screens you will see that we're still within sight of land."

"So what? Did I mention take-off?"

"You must understand, Wing Commander," stated Luff, "that the compressors drive the air blast."

"I understand very well and that is why I want them."

Luff pounded home his point with the first display of spirit Simon had seen from him. "The air blast is for the air,

not for the water. You can't confuse the two methods of propulsion. You don't understand these things."

"Really, Mr Luff. *Arion* is one unit. You cannot separate her propulsion into compartments. I am always ready to learn, sir, but it is obvious from your performance in the past few hours that you have nothing to teach me. Start the compressors!"

Luff was ready to protest again but he felt a strange pressure against his leg. He recoiled from it and hurriedly glanced down. The open jaws of an Alsatian dog were not an inch from his ankle.

He signalled the engine-room. "Start the compressors."

"Thank you," said Simon.

The sun was up astern, and the sea and sky visible ahead, beyond the broad latticed dome of perspex panels which formed the canopy of the bridge, were already brilliant with the new day. That superb canopy or cupola began at deck level, ran across the full width of the bows, and extended back overhead to the full depth of the bridge. Visibility was superb over a traverse of more than 200 degrees. The blind-spots were on the quarters and astern, but those sectors were amply covered by television.

A green light glowed on the instrument panel in front of Simon.

"Compressors on," said Luff.

"Good."

Simon checked all the instrument readings although he was not certain what some of them meant and jacked up the controlling officer's chair to a comfortable height. That chair had been retracted when Luff and Wesley had been forced to take the wheel as a two-man team. Simon settled at the wheel and tested the feel of the four levers mounted on what could best be termed the throttle-box at his right hand side. The two outer levers controlled the volume of air blast through the hydroplanes and the two inner levers controlled the air blast through the hull bottom. His hand spanned them comfortably. He knew from his study of the plans that the initial movement of the levers opened the master valve and allowed the air current to begin flowing through

the apertures. All further movement of the levers controlled the rate or force at which the air blast was directed downwards.

It was simple in theory and practice, but what effect was it going to have? How gradual or how violent would be the response? Simon knew that *Arion* had far more power than she needed. He knew that he was sitting on a powder keg. He may not have fully understood the operation of the controls, but he did know, whereas Luff did not know, that these levers could destroy *Arion* in seconds. Luff could not possibly know unless he had been told and Simon was certain that he had not been told. Luff was not a scientist. He was only a seaman.

Arion still ploughed into the west at a steady twelve knots. The cliffs of the coastline were fully in view, and Luff was already nervously wringing his hands, a mannerism that surprised Simon. Somehow he could not fit Luff into this wicked picture of deception that the Prime Minister had given him. He was sure that Frank Luff was a good man; frightened, uncertain and even weak, but not bad.

"Very well, Mr Luff, if you carefully follow my procedure in the next few seconds you will learn how to keep your ship steady. With compressors on, select the two outer levers and advance them—thus—until the master valves open."

Simon eased them forward gradually and suddenly felt the pressure against his hand increase. Instantly, the two outer pressure gauges of his instrument panel fluctuated and the readings which had registered zero jumped to the second calibration. They were like twin clocks, those two gauges, each suddenly reading two o'clock.

"That's force 2," Luff said nervously, not at all sure that Simon wanted an opinion or even needed one.

"Thanks."

"Dr Chant predicts that she will become airborne at force 8."

"Thanks."

Luff wasn't sure whether Simon thanked him out of courtesy or gratitude. He desperately hoped that the thanks

stemmed from courtesy, although he wondered how Simon could possibly know these things. But that he did know something about *Arion* was obvious.

Simon continued to edge the levers forward until the gauges registered force 3 and the air blast passing through the apertures in the hydroplanes was already audible, already faintly roaring like a distant wind in trees. There was a pronounced and sudden change in the feel of the wheel, the ship was suddenly more responsive to rudder, and speed increased smoothly from twelve knots to something in the vicinity of eighteen.

Simon had not expected that response quite so soon. It startled him a little and he withdrew his fingers from the levers and took the wheel in both hands.

He could feel a nerve tremble in the pit of his stomach and he had to relax the tenseness of his features. He didn't want to reveal his uncertainty to anyone else.

Speed continued to increase gradually until it settled at twenty-one knots, and in the television screens before him Simon caught a glimpse of the wake that was beginning to boil away astern. He realized that *Arion* was beginning to draw close to land and that within a minute or less he would have to turn south.

"Mr Luff," he barked, "what was your previous course?"

"Two hundred degrees compass."

"Turning on to 200 compass."

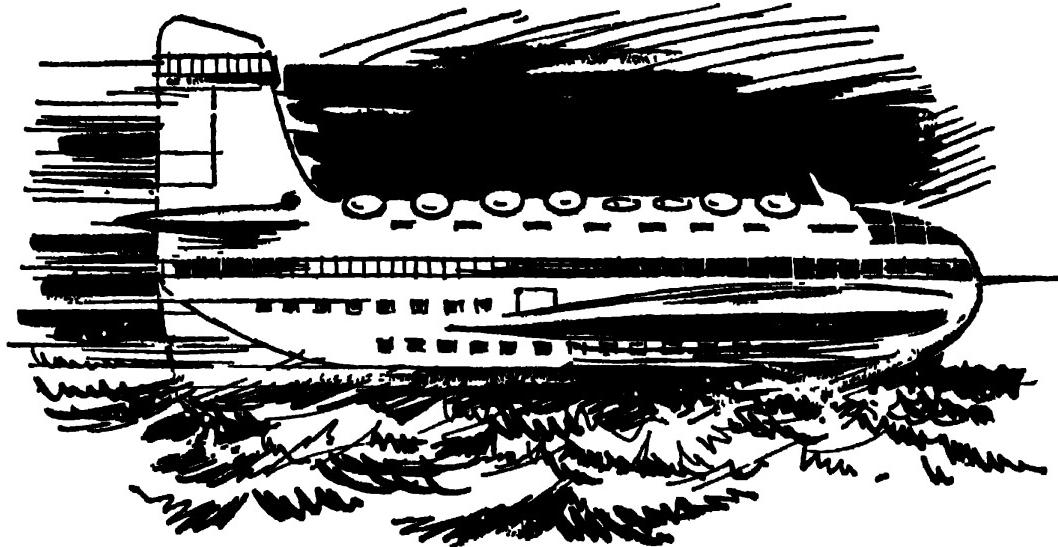
From the corner of his eye Simon saw Luff stiffen. Luff didn't know it, but Simon was equally apprehensive. He believed that *Arion* would remain stable as he turned cross wind, but the proof of the pudding was in the eating. Simon's belief was based on a theory and on a theory that he had formed quickly. It was possible that in his rapid calculations he had missed a vital point. The only certainty was the uncertainty.

Arion came round. For the first time she came round without fighting to hold her head into the wind. There was some resistance—there had to be—but she didn't fight.

"Steady on 200 compass, at about twenty-three knots."

The roll was still there, but it was gentle, it was controlled,

and Simon was already sure that by manipulating the air blast with care he could damp it out completely.



Simon could sense the peculiar atmosphere about him; the stunned silence from those members of the crew who should have been capable of speech and the reviving interest of those who had been stricken. He was keenly aware that by saving the ship from herself he had increased his personal danger. It had been simple enough to take command with only two or three men against him, but with crew members everywhere regaining their strength it would be a different problem. Once Scott became vocal again Simon's rule could be very short-lived.

He realized that Luff was very close to him. "How? How did you do it?"

"You saw."

"Of course I saw, but why?"

"Two reasons," said Simon. "Your air blast is a stabilizer, a cushion. Your ship can't roll because the steady blast of air against the surface of the sea won't allow it to. It sits there, like a hand, pressing against the sea. And it lifts your ship, just a fraction, and reduces the drag of the hull in the water, and when you reduce drag you increase speed, and when you increase speed to a rate above that at which the wind blows your ship further resists the tendency to swing into wind. Do you follow?"

"I follow. I certainly do."

Simon glanced at Luff keenly because the man's voice was unusually hard. "Were you going to say something more, Mr Luff?"

"No."

Luff indeed had been going to say more, but he couldn't afford to share confidences with Wing Commander Black.

"Another thing," continued Simon, "having attained your course and speed there is no need to hang on to the wheel like grim death. Your upper rudder, the one you use when you're airborne, can be trimmed a few degrees against the wind and that also will help you to steer a straight course. In fact, there are so many things to help you that *Arion* takes care of herself. Do I make myself clearly understood?"

Luff nodded. "But I do have a question."

"What is it?"

"Where did you get this knowledge? Who told you? And why do you pass it on to me?"

"Commander . . . I have been a pilot for twenty years. I've flown almost every type of aircraft made, including nearly three thousand hours on flying-boats. I have even designed a flying-boat and built it. My knowledge, sir, comes from personal experience and I pass it on because it is the obligation of every man to share his knowledge with others."

"Even with me?"

"Even with you, Mr Luff. . . . Mr Wesley!"

"Sir."

"Unless the captain has objections I see no reason why you should not resume your place at the controls."

Luff nervously squared his shoulders. "Yes, Mr Wesley. Please take over."

Simon stepped down and at once felt his eyes drawn to Scott. The big man, still far from well, was nevertheless pulling himself together and was in an ugly mood. To Simon's astonishment he had drawn a revolver.

Scott's voice, thin but passionate, was heard by every man on the bridge. "Get out of here!"

Simon had been surprised so often in the last few days that

he was becoming hardened to shocks. He had not expected thanks, but he had felt that some slight expression of gratitude would be a more likely development than an armed threat. He could have drawn his own revolver, but that would have been a very silly thing to do. He could have set Rex at the man, but that again would have produced violence. The one thing he did do was look to Luff for a gesture of friendship and support, but Luff despite his rank and bearing revealed himself once more to be a moral coward. Simon glanced from Luff, quickly, over every face that he could see, but he didn't have a friend, not one.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" he said. "What a miserable bunch you are! You're not worth worrying about. You can stew in your own juice. Come on, Rex; let's do as the man says. Let's get out of here and breathe some uncontaminated air."

"WAIT!"

The sharpness of the voice startled Simon as much as it startled everyone else. For a few moments Simon was unsure of its source; but then an insignificant and tired-looking little man stepped down from the radar platform at the rear of the bridge. It was Brian Tollis, the man with a conscience.

But Tollis was suddenly terrified by his own rashness and by having become the centre of attention, and immediately realized that he had set himself against his colleagues and his friends.

"What is it, Mr Tollis?" grated Scott.

Tollis didn't know. There wasn't a thought in his head. He felt frightened and alone; felt like a traitor despised by the rest of his race. He owed nothing to Simon Black. He owed everything to Scott. He had leapt before he had looked.

"Nothing," he stammered. "Nothing."

Tollis slunk back into the seclusion of his radar, a humbled man. All his courage, all his principles, were fluff and fancy.

Scott had picked his team well.

Simon had watched this strange interruption with deep concern. He had witnessed a human drama, but what lay behind the drama he didn't know and it intrigued him greatly. This drama revealed a crack in the armour of A.P.M. Perhaps it was a crack that could be widened. Perhaps it was the first

real sign of a possible breakthrough. This little man Tollis was a man to be watched, even to be cornered and questioned. This was something apart from the odd tricks played by Dr Ross Chant. Simon had not lost the round entirely.

He pulled on Rex's lead and backed out, backed almost to the door before he heard it suddenly open. He instantly thought of Alan. Thunder! He had forgotten Alan.

But it wasn't Alan.

Simon pivoted on his heel and confronted a wide-eyed seaman whose eyes were not for Simon at all, but for the revolver in Scott's hand.

The seaman gaped and apparently forgot the nature of his mission until Luff's flat voice demanded, "Well, did you find Dr Chant?"

The seaman fidgeted with his hands, unsettled by the realization that he had blundered into a tense situation.

"Come on, man. Did you find him?"

"No, sir. No, sir. We've even checked the escape hatches. He couldn't have left the ship but he doesn't seem to be on it."

No. Simon had not lost the round. So Chant's absence was causing anxiety, and with any sort of luck Chant would remain absent for as long as Simon decreed it. They had searched the ship, had they? But they hadn't searched detention quarters. That was an interesting point.

Simon decided that this was his moment to withdraw swiftly. He stepped round the seaman but was halted by a sharp command from Scott.

"Wing Commander!"

"Yes," said Simon.

"What do you know about Chant?"

"If," said Simon, "by a remote chance I did know anything, would I be likely to tell you? You sort out your own problems, Scott."

"That's not the answer I want."

"It's the only answer you'll get. Until you behave like a civilized man, Mr Scott, the last thing you can expect from me is co-operation. And that goes for the rest of you. As I said before, you can stew in your own juice."

"What do you mean by that?" snapped Scott.

"Exactly what I say. You'll know soon enough. You're sitting on top of a barrel of dynamite and the fuse is running out. Good morning!"

It was a frightful risk and Simon knew it. He knew he should have remained on the bridge even if it had cost him his self-respect. He desperately wanted to help Wesley and Luff because they needed help so much, but he couldn't get near them until Scott's nerve was broken. With Scott out of the way Simon was certain he could clean up the *Arion* affair in a few hours. Yes, he could get at the heart of it through Tollis.

He had to get rid of Scott, and the easiest way to break Scott—the easiest way to break them all—was to leave them to face the appalling dangers and terrors of take-off from that vantage point on the bridge where they would see and experience it at its most fearful.

The risk was that none of them would survive it, because the moment for take-off was the moment for disaster.

What had happened to Alan? Why hadn't he appeared on the bridge? Simon was very anxious to know, and he hastened down the steep companionway towards C Deck.

The atmosphere on the bridge was almost poisonous. They had known Scott to be irritable before, but they had never seen him as vicious as this. The instant the door closed on Simon Black, Scott reeled from his seat at the navigator's table and called Luff all the scum of the earth for allowing the wing commander to get near the controls, for allowing him to humiliate them all, for allowing him to demonstrate to Scott's own men the method by which they should control their own ship. He raved at Tollis and called him a viper. That he didn't destroy all the respect they had for him was startling evidence of the immense power he held over them. Scott was the stuff that dictators are made of. His moods were as violent and as changeable. He suddenly discerned that land was out of sight and shed his fury like a cloak.

"All clear for take-off, Mr Luff. Sound the warning."

The change of climate was too much for Luff. He had known his uncle all his life, but not until that moment had he ever suspected that he might be insane.

"Take-off," repeated Scott.

"Without Chant? Without his guidance?"

"We don't need Chant. He's only a blamed nuisance."

Luff was trembling from the shock of the last few minutes. He was in the wrong frame of mind to face this ordeal, but he knew he had to get on with it.

He sounded three blasts on the klaxon and over the inter-communication system they were heard on every deck, from stern to stern, throughout *Arion*.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAOS

SIMON realized before he had run far, that if Chant had not been found, Alan had not been found, and it became clear to him that Chant must have been a lone wolf who held as little regard for the members of A.P.M. as they perhaps held for him. That meant there was a possibility that Chant might become an ally and could be a valuable ally despite the Prime Minister's statement that he could not be relied on in a fight. Simon hoped most earnestly to avoid a fight, and the easiest way of doing so at this stage was to keep out of sight. Therefore, although he rushed back to the cell, he made certain that he was not followed or seen in transit. Simon had not heard Scott call Chant a nuisance, but if he had he probably would have agreed with him. Chant's role in the mystery was a perplexing one, but Simon was determined that it would not remain that way much longer. He'd get the truth out of Chant if he had to shake it out of him.

Simon was only ten paces from the cell door when Alan rushed out of it.

"Simon! Thank heaven you're here!"

"Eh? What's the trouble?"

"Chant! My sainted aunt, the story the man's told me would curl your hair!"

"Well, don't tell me here. Let's get inside."

"That won't do you any good, Skipper. This is no time for telling tales out of school. There's only one fact you need to know and I'll tell you that on the way to the bridge."

Simon restrained his excited friend with a very firm hand. "There's nothing we can do on the bridge. Scott's in charge again. We'd be wasting our time."

"You've got to *try*, Simon. You've got to stop them. They mustn't take off. Chant says once they increase power to

force 6, whatever that is, no power on earth can save *Arion*. He's done it deliberately. He's designed her for one reason only. To destroy herself."

"That's not news, Alan. We suspected it hours ago. Back inside. I want a word with Chant."

Alan fumed. "Words. Words. Words. You've got to act this time, Skipper. Chant is mad. He must be. You'll get nowhere talking to him. Don't you realize that there's not a man aboard this ship, including us, who has more than a few minutes to live?"

"I realize it's possible, but I hope it won't come to it. Understand, Alan, we're powerless here until Scott's nerve is broken. The only way to break it is to let them try to take off."

"How stupid can you get?" Simon had rarely seen Alan in such a state of nervous tension. Alan was pounding home his point by shaking his fist. "How *stupid* can you be? It's not a case of possibility. It's certainty. For heaven's sake don't set yourself up as a greater authority than Chant himself! You said yourself that—"

Alan stopped suddenly and even Simon's apprehension became a force to be reckoned with. Three klaxon blasts had sounded in their ears.

"There!" snapped Alan. "See! Too late. The take-off signal."

Simon darted round Alan and dashed into the cell. Chant was supporting himself on his elbow, still on the same bunk, nowhere near as resigned to his approaching death as he had hoped to be. The complications that had been thrust upon him in his last hours had not helped him, and no man, no matter how resolute, could remain unmoved by an imminent calamity that he had planned himself. When he saw Simon he shouted like a lunatic.

"I told you! I told you! Get off the ship! You've only got seconds."

Simon wasn't sure what to do with the man; to shake him or slap him or humour him. All he could do was shout back at him.

"Why have you done it, Chant? You've got to have a motive. What is it?"

"Please go," Chant pleaded. "There's an escape hatch aft, on this deck, on the starboard side, clearly marked. It'll take you a minute to get there. For heaven's sake, GO!"

Suddenly, Alan's strong hand grabbed Simon's coat between the shoulder blades and forcibly propelled him to the door, and when Alan applied his full strength there wasn't much that anyone could do about it.

"Skipper," Alan said with fierce intensity, "impossible or not, you've got to try to stop them."

"But we're helpless," Simon shouted, "until the crew break themselves. We can't break them."

Alan propelled Simon back round the corridor towards the companionway, pushing with all his might.

"Okay," said Alan, "you know what the P.M. said. Take command by force. We're armed. We've got Rex. We'll take it by force. When it's life or death you can't play it with kid gloves."

They were back inside the hydroplane, almost to the companionway, when they heard it.

Simon dug in his heels and stopped dead.

A roar like an approaching express train seemed to fill the ship, seemed so close to them that it was around them and beneath their feet.

"The air blast," rasped Simon. "Luff's giving it a go."

"Well, this isn't the time to stop!"

Alan pushed Simon hard and they started scrambling up the steep flight of stairs.

They didn't even reach B Deck. A crushing force took their strength away, dragged them down onto their knees, and they had to cling to the steps to prevent their bodies from being tumbled back to the bottom of the flight.

Luff it was who sat in the controlling officer's seat. The responsibility of take-off was something he could not demand of Wesley. Luff's limbs were almost unbearably tense—dangerously so. It was vital that he should relax, but he

couldn't. He knew as he had never known before that this was not a task for a sailor, but for an airman. He was so frightened he would cheerfully have surrendered career and reputation just to hand this wheel over to Simon Black. Black had handled it so easily, so beautifully, so confidently. He had been able to predict the behaviour of the ship, whereas to Luff it was a complete mystery.

Black had said that they were sitting on top of a barrel of dynamite and that the fuse was running out. Luff took that for a warning, as Simon had intended he should, and when he began to increase the air blast he did so with painstaking, nerve-racking care.

There was no apparent change or response until the instruments registered force 3; there was no obvious increase in the volume of noise. But there was one unexpected development: speed did not build up but began to fall away slowly. By the time the instruments registered force 3.5 speed had dropped to seventeen knots.

The dramatic change came at force 4. The air blast suddenly roared and speed sharply decreased, although the propellers driving the ship from astern began to race. *Arion* lurched from what appeared to be a severe blow delivered from beneath the hull. She kicked her tail high, dropped her nose, and Luff panicked.

He slammed the air-blast throttles shut and twelve hundred tons of ship slammed back into a thundering sea, pitching, tossing and shuddering, almost submerging herself in a fantastic splash, producing a roaring upsurge of water that crashed over the bridge cupola and blotted out the television pictures astern.

Luff was unable to interpret the majority of his instruments. They simply didn't make sense to him, or his mind was incapable of reading them. From the extraordinary pressures that were being exerted on his body he knew the ship was slewing hard to starboard for no apparent reason, and his compasses and gyros confirmed it. Engine revs had dropped, but the speed was building up again. That at least was understandable, because once more she had dug her tail into the sea.

Suddenly he realized that he had accidentally shut the master valves by closing off all the air blast, when he had intended only to reduce it to force 2. He opened the throttles again but in his confusion thrust forward all four levers, thus bringing into operation for the first time the immensely powerful air-speed jets in the bottom of the hull. These were not directed straight downwards, as in the hydroplanes, but towards the stern at an angle of forty-five degrees.

Arion was instantly uncontrollable. She veered off to starboard, seeking to swing into the wind, but was unable to do so because Simon had earlier trimmed the rudder against it. Luff had forgotten that, and now his mind was a blank, an unreasoning void of panic, and *Arion* was crashing through the seas smothered in foam, creating with her own compressors an impenetrable fog of sea spray through which nothing beyond the strict limits of the ship herself could be seen. The sound was devilish. The concussion of the unseen water against the vibrating hull was savage, rapid, and incredibly dangerous.

The ship reeled across the ocean blinded from within and invisible from without. If any eye had seen her, the eye would not have believed. She was a boiling and shapeless eruption of foam and spray zigzagging across the surface of the sea.

In Luff's ears a dozen voices were screaming, but he neither understood them nor heeded them, nor could he have done. The panic-stricken officers had nothing to express except their terror.

Luff was utterly confounded. Despite the irregularities of the instrument readings he knew that the power output was barely force 3, which was lower than before, and Chant had said that *Arion* would not become airborne until the blast reached force 8.

Desperately Luff slammed the outer throttles shut again, because it was the only thing he could do, but he omitted to close the two inner throttles for the excellent reason that he still did not realize he had opened them. *Arion's* reaction was devastating to nerves, emotions, and bodies. She instantly

settled deeper and erupted from around her hull a mass of gigantic and violent bubbles which were visible on the television screens because the air-blast spray from the hydroplanes had ceased. The noise, a multiple gurgle which beggared description, was magnified within the ship until it sounded like the end of the world. *Arion* lost the remnants of stability that she had had and pitched drunkenly fore and aft through a foaming sea.

Suddenly, a startling form of silence shuddered through *Arion*. It wasn't a total silence, but it was a silence of apparently all things mechanical. It was not instantaneous, but made itself apparent over a period of about ten seconds. Instrument readings fell back to zero; the devilish sound from beneath the hull ceased entirely; and *Arion* plunged and wallowed without power of any kind, slowly swinging of her own accord into the wind.

Luff was absolutely shattered. He was beaten breathless. He was too weak to question the cause; too overcome to care.

No fewer than three telephones called persistently, but he made no attempt to answer them. Instead, he slowly turned his head and surveyed the shocked faces that were the faces of his crew. No one spoke to him, not even Scott. They were stupid from the aftermath of fear; speechless, bruised, dishevelled; stunned by *Arion's* failure.

Luff pulled himself together with an immense effort of will and slowly addressed his uncle. "I'm sorry," he said, "but you'll have to write *Arion* off. I'll have nothing more to do with her. Duty demands a certain amount from a man, but nothing demands this. I am certain that it is only by the grace of God that we are alive. . . ."

Scott didn't argue. He knew he was beaten just as Luff was beaten. He knew *Arion* would never go to sea. He had created the jinx himself and it had rebounded on his own head. In that moment Scott was a broken man and he dared not think beyond the moment. The end of *Arion* was almost the same as the end of his own life. She was a devil ship all right. A crazy ship. She wasn't a ship at all.

"Mr Gaffney," Luff said wearily to the wireless officer,

"prepare to signal the harbour authorities and request them to dispatch a tug to tow us home."

Luff heaved himself away from the controls and staggered rather than walked to his own station—the captain's chair—on the starboard side. Suddenly he snapped, "Someone answer those confounded telephones—and, Mr Wesley, take the wheel. Hold her into the wind."

Some unknown instinct then compelled Luff to glance at the big door on his starboard side. It was partly open, held open, and there stood Simon Black and Alan Grant, so placed that Luff felt he alone could see them. He didn't hold their gaze, but turned his eyes quickly away, not ashamed, but with a sense of fright and renewed despair, because this time Black said nothing but allowed a revolver to speak for him. Black's revolver was aimed at Luff himself.

Luff didn't know what to do because in his heart he knew that these two men stood for what was right, and that he, in some unfathomable way, had become a mouthpiece for what was wrong.

Someone called. "Captain. Engine-room reports that they cut all power on their own initiative. They felt it was the right thing to do."

Luff nodded. "Good. Hang up. Replace all receivers. I want no further communication with any part of the ship. . . . Has that signal been prepared?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please do not transmit it for a few moments. It is possible that my authority here has come to an end, and I can't say that I'll be sorry to see it go."

Luff turned again to Simon and again looked into those steady eyes and directly into the muzzle of the revolver. "You may enter, Wing Commander Black."

Simon accepted the invitation and Alan smartly followed him, seeking out Scott as the special target for his revolver. There was no mistaking the threat. Both Scott and Luff were in the direct line of fire of two .38 service revolvers.

"All right," Simon said. "This time there's not going to be any nonsense—"

Scott lurched to his feet and Alan could see him fumbling

for a weapon, and Alan was a man of action if he was nothing else. He took off across the bridge like a greyhound. In his weakened state it cost him much, but his willingness to attack convinced Scott that resistance would be unwise, even fatal. He had already suffered at Alan's hands, he knew that this red-headed young man meant business.

Scott sank back into his seat beside the navigator and handed his gun to Alan. "You'll go to jail for this," he spluttered. "Jail! It's piracy."

"You tell that one to the marines," growled Alan. "Okay, Skipper. The floor's yours."

"All right, gentlemen," Simon said. "This is the position. Until I hand this ship back to Commander Luff I'm in charge. For your own sakes you are to continue with your normal duties. This is not piracy. I have been duly authorized to take command if necessary, and I consider it's necessary right now. I propose to get this ship into the air if it's humanly possible and to arrive in one piece at Pearl Harbour. I'm not doing this for love of you or for your reputations. I am merely obeying my orders as I expect every one of you to do. And this is the first order—no man, I repeat, no man is to inform any member of the crew that Commander Luff is not the captain of his own ship. There is to be no mention of this incident. All crew members are forbidden to enter the bridge and no one at present on the bridge is permitted to leave. We have a sentry posted at the door and not a living soul will get past him, one way or the other. That sentry is a dog and you can take my word for it—he knows his trade. . . . Are there any questions?"

"Yes," scowled Scott. "You say you have been authorized. Can you show me that authority?"

"I certainly can, but I won't. Sufficient to say, sir, that it bears the signature of the Prime Minister and that you, in particular, would find it most unpleasant reading. Are there any other questions—genuine questions—not personal issues?"

Wesley said, "Where's Dr Chant?"

"Dr Chant is a sick man, but you needn't worry about him. He's well able to look after himself—in fact, he's too able. He is at present locked in detention quarters—and, Mr

Luff, you would be serving everyone well if you telephoned the medical officer at once and instructed him to assign an orderly to Chant. He is to be guarded by a medical orderly at all times and under no circumstances is he to be permitted to leave the cell."

Luff stared at Simon.

"You heard me, Mr Luff. If you were in possession of the knowledge I have, you would do the same."

Luff shrugged and rang sick quarters.

"Mr Scott," said Simon, "will you please vacate your chair? There is no need for you to sit beside the navigator. Squadron Leader Grant will be supervising navigation from now on. . . . And, Mr Wesley, will you vacate your chair also? I will be taking the controls myself. . . . Right. Start the engines and the compressors."

Scott retired to the rear of the bridge to one of the seats that had been provided for the official observers. The observers were still absent, so Scott was alone—well able to watch everything that was happening, yet isolated.

Scott was so full of hatred that it almost consumed him. His thoughts were desperate and violent. He still had another gun and it was a miracle he didn't drag it out and fire it. The tragedy was that until three or four years ago Scott had been a good man; he probably still was, underneath it all. But when he had been appointed to the senior position in the A.P.M. Division, the first taste of real power he had ever had, it had gone to his head. The Minister, who had always respected Scott, had given him the post in reward for long and faithful service. Naturally, it had not been within the Minister's power to give Scott the position without approval from other quarters, but that approval had been unanimous. Scott was a solid citizen—or had been.

Scott had found that his power to employ men and dismiss them had not been enough. He had found that he had wanted to own men and he had achieved that aim to a remarkable degree. He almost owned A.P.M., body and soul. But that had not been enough either. He began to see himself in a heroic light. He had visions of receiving a knighthood. He saw him-

self as a man to be acclaimed and honoured, and so he began to weave his devilish net of intrigue and deceit; and it began on that one day when an unobtrusive-looking man called at his home and proved to be an agent for Gervinus. The arrangement that Scott made with Gervinus had changed the direction of his life.

Somewhere, he knew, he had made a mistake; try as he would he couldn't find it, but there must have been a mistake or Simon Black would not be aboard this ship taking command by force. Somehow the government had learned of his association with Gervinus and that was the most dreadful thing that had ever happened to Scott. Scott was in appalling danger and he had to fight his way out of it. But how? How?

There was only one ray of hope. If Black actually got *Arion* into the air and headed her safely into the Pacific, Scott would still be in business. Black might have thought he was serving himself, but he wasn't; he would only be serving Scott.

Much as Scott hated the airman, much as he wanted to hurt him, he still hoped that Black would succeed where Luff had failed.

The danger was that *Arion* would not get into the air at all.

Simon sounded the three warning blasts on the klaxon and into the intercommunication system addressed an order to every man aboard. "All hands to secure safety belts and on no account is power to be cut off unless specifically ordered by the captain."

"Navigator to Captain." That was Alan's voice. "Wind 240 degrees thirteen knots."

"Thank you. Please prepare and code a distress signal and hand it to the wireless officer. . . . Mr Gaffney, that signal is to be transmitted only in the event of disaster and on my order. Is this understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr Tollis," said Simon, "please report immediately the bearing and distance of all ships within a radius of twenty-five miles."

Tollis's nervous voice announced that there were radar contacts of five ships, but the closest was placed at twenty-seven miles almost due south.

"Thank you," said Simon. "And now a brief word for all you gentlemen on the bridge. I guarantee nothing except a rough ride. I know that at force 6 it is possible I will lose control. But I'm going to try. I can't do more than that."

Simon turned the ship on to 240 degrees, which placed her head to the wind. He had her moving on that course at twenty-one knots with the hydroplane air blast set at force 2. She was stable, and controls, although light to the touch, were positive.

This was trial and error. He had no more real knowledge of the correct procedure than Luff had had. The correct procedure could only be found by experiment, but Simon at least understood the principle of the ship and he determined to make a direct lift from the sea if it were possible. Forward speed could look after itself. If he ended up with none he would not be worried. The big thing was to get *Arion* off the surface.

He increased the blast slowly to force 3 and held off and waited. The ship was still stable, speed was unchanged, but the depth gauge informed him that she had raised her hull almost a foot. He would not have known except for the reading on the gauge.

He steadily advanced the throttle to force 4 and the roar from the jets was distressing and a turbulent mist boiled off the surface of the sea. Speed dropped to less than ten knots and *Arion* dipped her nose alarmingly.

Why?

Simon, almost breathless with anxiety, held the blast at force 4, and he knew that this must have been the stage where Luff had panicked.

He held it and waited.

Arion remained nose down. Speed finally trickled back to zero although the engine revs were running mad. Of course, the screws were out of the water, beating the air. Simon couldn't see a thing astern because the television screens were blanketed by that impenetrable mist of sea spray, but his

gyros and instruments told him everything he needed to know.

"Mr Luff," he barked, "instruct the engine-room to stop the screws at once."

Luff acted immediately and the rev counters recorded that the engines had been stopped.

Simon had achieved something. By thunder, he had!

"Gentlemen," he shouted, "this is not a very comfortable position, but it's safe. We are not off the water entirely, but almost. At the present moment the tail must be fully fifteen feet above the surface although the bows are still in the water. . . . Mr Luff!"

"Sir."

"Instruct all crew members not otherwise engaged to proceed at once to the tail compartment on B Deck. It'll be a steep climb up the sloping decks, but they've got to get there. We need ballast in the stern. At the double."

Luff repeated the order into the intercom and Simon again sat back to wait. Don Chandler had been right about her nose-heaviness. Simon had called the position uncomfortable but safe, but the facts were otherwise and Simon knew it. This was touch and go.

Simon allowed the crewmen five minutes to get to the tail. He guessed that there would be approximately thirty of them with a gross weight in the vicinity of two and a half tons. Allowing for the fact that not all of these men would have been stationed ahead of the centre of gravity before they were ordered to move, the best he could hope for now would be a redistribution of weight equalling about four tons—an insignificant figure when placed against the all-up weight of twelve hundred tons, but that wasn't the point. An extra four tons in the tail should bring into operation the law of the lever, that law by which a small force could move a large force.

But it didn't work. The result was scarcely worth the effort. *Arion* remained tail high and nose down and the angle of the slope decreased by only three degrees.

"Mr Luff," said Simon. "Thank you. Instruct the crewmen to remain where they are and to brace themselves."

Luff passed the order on and Simon knew he had reached the crossroads. It was now that he had to decide whether to apply more force or to take *Arion* back to dock.

The real problem was the knowledge that Dr Ross Chant had designed this ship to beat her controlling officer. To get *Arion* safely off the water was more than a feat of seamanship or airmanship. It would be a battle between two minds, Simon's and Chant's, and that was why Simon decided to press on. It was a question of pride and nothing more—the very emotion that Alan had warned him against only a day or two before.

He increased air blast to force 4.5.

He felt the tail kick up again, so high that books and manuals slid from tables. Throughout the ship loose articles, so recently replaced, again crashed from shelves; crewmen were pitched from their feet; liquids spilt; cups, saucers and plates broke in their dozens. Even those men secured to their stations or seats by safety belts were thrown forward to the maximum their belts allowed.

Simon dug in his heels and waited. He was aware now of some forward movement, a slewing and unstable movement brought about by the air blast from the hydroplanes striking the surface of the sea at an angle.

So this was force 4.5. What on earth would happen at force 6? Yes, it was beginning to become apparent. *Arion* would rise more and more steeply by the tail until the angle of air blast from the hydroplanes was so sharp that it would give the ship sufficient forward motion to dive in and break her back. So that was how Chant had planned it. Only one thing was wrong with Chant's theory. By stating that *Arion* would not become airborne until force 8 he had imagined that the controlling officer would advance the throttle levers much more quickly and produce a reaction so violent that it would be beyond human control. Chant had reckoned without two things. First, that Simon would warn Luff to be careful, and, second, that Simon would take the controls himself. As far as Simon was concerned, forewarned was forearmed, but no matter how slowly he advanced the throttles the end would eventually be the same. Perhaps the end would not be as

violent but it would be every bit as certain. Nothing could arrest the ship's destruction. At force 6 she would dive in.

Simon knew the sensible thing was to accept defeat and throttle off carefully, allowing the ship to settle back into the sea, but the spectacle of a vessel costing twelve million pounds slinking into harbour with her tail between her legs disgusted him. It would also mean that this devilish business in the background, this mystery of *Arion*, would remain unsolved.

Simon knew there was an answer, because there was an answer to all things, but what was it?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHANT'S MISCHIEF

"**A**RION" slewed her perilous passage across the sea, waterborne at the bows but airborne at the stern, creeping into the wind at about two knots, slowly swinging her tail like a lazy dog, but thrashing the sea beneath her angled hydroplanes with a savage fury, blasting the water into a dense white mist.

Simon, still balanced precariously like a man on the edge of a cliff, reached for the microphone that connected him to the engine-room.

"Chief," he barked, "are you there?"

"Yes, sir. This is Dawson."

"Tell me, Mr Dawson. I believe the compressors for the air blast in the hull bottom are arranged in two banks. Correct?"

"Yes, sir. . . . By the way, who is that speaking?"

"We'll worry about that later, Mr Dawson. Now these two banks of compressors. One provides the blast for'ard; the other aft. Correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"But they work in unison?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can they be separated? Can you give me blast for'ard, but not aft?"

"It was not intended that I should, sir. They work together."

"I know very well how they're intended to work. Please answer my question. It must be obvious to you that we're in difficulties."

"Yes, sir. They will work separately, but the adjustment will take several minutes. Which bank do you require?"

"For'ard," thundered Simon. "At the double!"

It was a frail chance, but it was worth taking. If he could bring a sufficiently strong thrust to bear on the surface of the

sea ahead of the centre of gravity, he might be able to get the nose up, and once that nose was up and the ship was moving he could do something about correcting Chant's mischief by closing off some jets in the hydroplanes or increasing the blast through others. But that was still in the future. He had to get this monster moving, on course, at speed, and with stability, before anything else could be considered.

"Mr Luff!"

"Sir."

"It may be advisable to inform all hands that *Arion's* present position will not be permanent. Explain that certain experiments are being conducted and that this is one of them. There will be more and they may be worse."

Luff was repeating the message into the intercom when Dawson called Simon from the engine-room. "Hull compressors aft are shut down. Hull compressors for'ard will engage as you advance the two inner throttles. Is this understood, sir?"

"Understood," said Simon.

Immediately, he advanced them, because he knew the more he thought about it the less inclined he would be to do it. He might have looked the supremely confident master of the situation—Luff certainly thought he was—but Simon was frozen with anxiety. The moment he touched those two levers he heard the deep-pitched sound, the extraordinary gurgle that seemed to arise from the depths of the sea, as high-pressure air was released from one hundred jets beneath the bows.

At force 1 there was a distinct response, an uneasy wallowing, that almost turned Simon's stomach. For a black moment he thought she was about to dive. Twelve hundred tons and fifty lives hung in the balance.

He realized suddenly, with shock, that the ship was still slewing slowly from side to side but had increased her forward speed by several knots and had settled a little in the water; not deeper than before but along a greater degree of her length. The gyros confirmed it. It was a fact. *Arion* was slowly righting herself; sitting on the surface of the foaming sea like a cockle-shell, but righting herself. She let her tail

down with the utmost gentleness and in seventeen seconds flat was straight, level, and stable.

It was remarkable. It was wonderful. If Simon had not been so conscious of the dignity of his position he would have whooped for joy.

Right. He increased the hydroplane blast to force 5 and caught the renewed dropping of the nose by increasing the hull blast to force 1.5. Again *Arion* steadied and the depth gauges recorded that she was drawing only one foot of water and speed had built up to twelve knots purely from the thrust of the jets in the hull.

Simon called the engine-room again. "Mr Dawson, please raise the counter-weight."

"You mean the keel, sir?"

"Yes."

"You can do it from where you are, sir. The switch panel is below the throttle-box at your right hand. It's switch number eight. The red one. Flick it forward."

"Thank you, Mr Dawson."

"Have you got her licked, sir?" Dawson sounded really human then.

Simon, too, relaxed the curtness of his tone. "I don't know. . . . How long does the keel take to come up?"

"Fourteen seconds, sir."

Simon flicked the switch forward, counted off the seconds, tightened until his nerves almost snapped, and advanced the hydroplane blast to force 6, instantly chasing it with hull blast to 2.5.

Arion trembled from stem to stern; but it was not a violent tremble. It seemed to Simon that it was an expression of eagerness, and it ceased as suddenly as it began. He simply did not know that the ship was airborne. Nothing much seemed to have happened at all, and he was strangely disappointed. He had expected a life and death struggle at force 6 but the only positive reaction was a peculiar and sharp decrease in the volume of noise. He also failed to realize the significance of that until he raised his eyes from the instruments and looked ahead. The surface had fallen away from beneath him and, although *Arion* seemed to be motionless, she was moving

steadily and at increasing speed into the west. In momentary consternation, unable to believe his eyes, he dropped his gaze to the instruments on the flying panel. The airspeed indicator registered thirty-five knots and the radar altimeter recorded a height of twenty feet.

He knew this was a great moment but not a voice broke the human silence. He leant forward, switched his intercom selector through to "Broadcast", and addressed every man aboard through the amplifiers.

"Gentlemen. This is Wing Commander Black. Your captain kindly allowed me the privilege of attempting to control this wonderful but very temperamental vessel. I am happy to say it is under control. You're airborne. Prepare for acceleration."

What the crew had to say, Simon didn't know; they were beyond his hearing. But the reaction of the officers on the bridge was unusual. They didn't cheer, they didn't applaud. They remained so silent that Simon wondered whether they were going to knife him in the back. If he had not known that Alan was behind him, he would have been very worried. Eventually, his curiosity got the better of him and he had to turn his head. He was astonished by what he saw. Scott, none other than Scott, at the rear of the bridge, had dropped his face in his hands and was sobbing, and Luff, his nephew, was seated beside him, comforting him, with a strong arm across his shoulders.

Simon caught Luff's eye and Luff called, "Thank you. Carry on."

How strange it was. Luff wasn't weak any more. His voice had strength and conviction. He didn't speak as an inferior person but as an equal, and Simon knew why, and rejoiced for Luff. Commander Frank Luff was a free man again. The agonized suspense of take-off had not broken him, but had broken his uncle.

There was more to this than met the eye but that would have to wait. A man of Scott's stature didn't break for nothing.

Alan pressed the intercom button. "Navigator to Captain. Before acceleration alter course to 130 degrees compass."

"Captain understood," said Simon. "Turning on to 130 degrees compass."

He turned and *Arion* moved regally on to 130 degrees, spraying out behind her a wake of spectacular grandeur.

"On course," said Simon. "I will now accelerate to force 8."

"Wireless Officer to Wing Commander Black."

"Yes. What is it?"

"Message from base, sir. Message reads: 'Anxiety concerning your prolonged silence. Please acknowledge and report.' Message ends."

"Acknowledge—and tell them to stand by for an important signal."

"Understood, sir."

"Very well," said Simon. "I am accelerating."

Ahead of him now was the unknown. His new course was directing him towards the Pacific, but the renewed pressure of his right hand on the throttle-box could still direct him into oblivion. A.P.M. believed that *Arion* was capable of one hundred knots at a height of approximately fifty feet. Perhaps they were right, but Simon didn't think so.

The problem now was to strike the right balance between hydroplane blast and hull blast. Admittedly only half the blast from the hull would be operating, but *Arion* had already shown that she had far more power in all departments than she needed. With hull blast at 2.5 she was already moving at thirty-five knots and the maximum power available was force 12.

He took her through to force 8.

The response was not violent. There was a tendency for *Arion* to drop her nose, but Simon picked it up through increased power from the hull bottom. She wound up slowly to sixty-seven knots and stayed there. She was rock steady; beautiful; thirty feet above the surface of the sea and with hull blast at force 4.

Simon was certain she now had sufficient stability to survive a higher blast rate from the hull and he ran it through to force 5.

He felt her go up and in five seconds the altimeter was

registering fifty feet and airspeed had increased to eighty. *Arion* felt tail-heavy for the first time and Simon wasn't sure whether that was good or bad. Although he was gratified to be alive he was a long way from happy. There were still too many uncertainties, and he was not sure that the controlling officer's seat was correctly placed. Visibility wasn't quite right. He didn't feel secure.

He advanced hull blast to force 6.

Tail-heaviness became more pronounced and there was only one way to correct it. He increased the hydroplane blast to force 9.

For a moment he thought he had gone too far. For a moment he was sure he was going to lose control. He had even inhaled to yell to Gaffney to transmit the distress signal. *Arion* had suddenly become alive. That momentary eagerness he had felt in her as she had left the water possessed her from end to end. She had flicked her nose up and dropped it again, but height above the water increased to a hundred and twenty feet and airspeed passed a hundred knots and kept going, building up and up until it steadied at one hundred and fifty-two.

Simon was trembling from head to foot. This he had not expected. Great Scott, no! The main forward thrust as applied through the hull was operating at only half normal strength and then at only half the span of the throttle quadrant. If this were force 6, what in thunder was force 12?

He was conscious of Alan's voice. "Are you okay, Skipper?"

"Sure. Sure."

"Don't you think you've taken her far enough?"

"She can take it. I'm sure she could give us two-fifty knots and still stay in one piece. It's desirable, I think, to raise the cruising speed as high as we can. The faster she goes, the safer she is."

"My sainted aunt, boy! Twelve hundred tons at two-fifty knots?"

"There's no law against it."

"Except the law of common sense."

"We'll see. I'm going to drive her down towards the surface

by increasing hull blast to force 8. This'll be the acid test for the air-cushion theory. If the cushion works she can't dive in."

Simon switched over to broadcast. "Wing Commander Black to all hands. We're doing fine. A hundred and fifty knots and all's well. Prepare for major acceleration."

Suddenly, Alan was standing beside him, bracing himself, although he need not have done, by clinging to the back of Simon's seat.

"Skipper," he said tensely, "you're getting your wires crossed. Hull blast has consistently driven her higher. How are you going to drive her down to the surface by giving her more power?"

"Alan, in all aircraft you reach the point where you can't climb higher and I don't believe that *Arion* can get any higher. It's the feel of her. It's her design. I'm certain that with more acceleration she'll dive. Air blast can do funny things. Return to your seat and strap yourself in."

What could Alan say? Simon could be difficult at times and once he started playing with speed he was playing with his favourite toy. Alan didn't say anything. What was the use?

He shrugged and returned to his seat and the instant he was settled Simon drove the hull blast through to force 8, and Simon proved himself wrong. He proved that the bigger they were the harder they fell. *Arion* didn't dive at all. She remained precisely where she was—at one hundred and twenty feet—but she increased her velocity to two hundred and forty knots, without pitching, veering, vibration, or fuss.

"Wing Commander Black to all hands. Return to your stations. Resume normal duties. *Arion* is on course and she's as safe as the Bank of England. . . . And navigator! Prepare and code a signal for base: 'On course. Superb performance. Stable at two forty knots. Height one hundred and twenty feet. Position—whatever it is. Estimated time of arrival at Pearl Harbour not forty-eight hours hence, but twenty hours from now.'"

"That's interesting," said Alan.

"Is it?" Simon was vaguely surprised.

"Yes. Allowing for the International Date Line, we will

arrive at our destination at 6.30 a.m. today, whereas you can see, if you glance at the clock, it is already 7 a.m."

"Your little games," growled Simon, "sometimes leave me cold."

Another voice called Simon, "Commander Luff here. Congratulations."

Yes. Simon had thought that some form of a pat on the back, however restrained, was in order. "Thanks," he said dryly.

"Just a point, Wing Commander. If we're really at sea; if we're really on the way—"

"What do you think?" Simon interrupted.

Luff hesitated. He was just a little surprised to discover that Black was human. "Sorry . . . of course we're on the way. But it raises a problem. If we're twenty-eight hours early at Pearl Harbour, it's going to mess up the Americans. They won't be ready for us."

"My dear friend," said Simon, "if we tell the Americans we're going to be early, they'll be ready."

It was Alan who realized first that Simon was irritable; not just out of sorts, but really bad tempered, and that was unlike Simon. When the reason came to Alan he could have kicked himself for his blindness. Simon had been going, without interruption, for twenty-four hours. He had neither slept nor eaten, but the mental and physical labours demanded from him during that period had been immense.

Alan called Luff to the navigation table and briefly stated the position. Luff at once rang the galley and ordered a prince of breakfasts to be delivered to the bridge as soon as possible. When Luff looked up again he was astonished to see his uncle standing beside the wing commander, and if he had known the trend of the conversation he would have been horrified; but the details of that conversation were not for his ears, not for a while yet. Luff was presented, suddenly, with another problem that shocked him to the core.

A winking red light appeared on the switch panel beside his empty chair on the starboard side. Luff crossed to it and took the call. It was Huxley, the medical officer.

"What is it, Luke?" said Luff.

"This fellow Chant. He's gone berserk."

"What's that?"

"Stark raving mad. You said we were to keep him locked in detention quarters. The orderly went in to see if he was all right and the fiend took to him with a lump of metal. Piece of a bed. Laid the poor devil out cold."

"Chant did that?"

"He certainly did; but where he is now I haven't the faintest idea. You've got a lunatic on the ship and heaven knows where. You've got to find him, Captain. What's he going to do next?"

Luff was stunned.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GERVINUS

WHEN Scott appeared beside Simon he was composed, apparently fully recovered from his odd humiliation.

Simon knew he was there but ignored him. If Scott had anything to say he could say it, but there were strict limits to what Simon was prepared to listen to. He wouldn't have given a pinch for Scott. He didn't like the man. If he had come to make an apology, Simon even doubted whether he would accept it. Scott would have to be very careful of every word he said. He had probably never addressed a more hostile audience.

"I have something to tell you."

Simon nodded.

"You have much to forgive me for, but I'm going to try to put things right."

"Why?"

"Because I must."

Simon turned a cold and distasteful eye on the man. "Don't waste my time, Scott, with sentiment. I couldn't take it from you."

To give Scott his due, he didn't cringe one way or the other. "All right. We won't go into details. The reasons are obvious, no doubt, to every man on the bridge except yourself. Your achievement here this morning is worthy of some reward. I cannot offer you anything personal because you wouldn't take it if I did. I've never misjudged you, Black, not for a minute. What my men have been led to believe and what I know are two different things. I know you were pulled into it at the last minute. I know you saved A.P.M. this morning when A.P.M. couldn't save itself—because I'm A.P.M., and I wasn't big enough for it. I've kidded myself while I've kidded all the sheep around me. Maybe I've made

something out of them, but I've dragged my own principles into the gutter."

"What's this, Scott?" growled Simon. "Change of heart or change of face?"

"Judge for yourself. I can only tell you the truth if I can remember. I've lived a lie for so long that I scarcely know which is truth and which is falsehood. Does the word Gervinus mean anything to you?"

"It does."

"How did you find out?"

"You're not questioning me, Scott. You're telling me."

"I'm the one. No one else. Only me. If others are guilty they're guilty in ignorance."

"I'll be the judge of that."

Simon's face was like flint but his heart was leaping with exaltation. He sensed the breakthrough, yet knew that he had to remain very, very cautious.

"But it's not what it seems. Understand? I'm not a traitor to my country, Black. I was making a bid for glory and it's backfired on me. Thanks to you." Scott sighed. "Perhaps it's for the best."

"Perhaps."

Scott, suddenly, shook his head vigorously. "No. No perhaps about it. It is. It's for the best. Something might have gone wrong. I mightn't have pulled it off."

"Wing Commander Black!" That was Luff's voice and he was standing at a respectful distance.

"Yes," said Simon.

"It's Dr Chant. He's knocked the orderly unconscious with a piece of metal. He's disappeared. The medical officer says he must be mad."

"Oh. . ." Simon found it very difficult not to reveal his alarm.

"What is this about Chant?" asked Luff. "I frankly can't believe it."

What was Simon to say? The wrong word could start a panic. Chant on the loose, with destruction in his heart, and knowing every inch of the ship, could sabotage her almost at will; yet if Simon didn't provoke an urgent enough response

from Luff and his crew, *Arion* might be in bits before they knew it.

"The question of Dr Chant," said Simon, "is roughly this. He *is* mad, from our point of view anyway; and he *is* dangerous, to himself and to us. Why this has happened to him I don't know, but he must be found at once, for his own good." Simon narrowed his eyes, endeavouring to express as much as he could without words. "At once, Luff. Make no mistake about it."

"Very well. I'll take your word for it. . . . Mr Wesley!"

Wesley appeared smartly from the oblivion into which events had forced him. "Yes, sir."

"Supervise an immediate search for Ross Chant. Use every available man. He must be found, and restrained, by force if necessary."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"My microphone is at your disposal," said Luff. "Use it and then get below yourself."

Simon called for Alan, and although Alan was not aware of the emergency that had arisen something in Simon's voice brought him bounding to the controls. "What is it, Skipper?"

"Chant's broken out. The crew's on the job, but see what Rex can do. You know, the old scent routine."

"Sure."

"Can you safely leave Skinner to navigate?"

"Skinner's okay. No worries there."

"Good. See you later, boy."

Suddenly, Simon was alone with Scott again, and Scott had followed every word with a growing dismay. After all, he still was director of A.P.M. and there would have been no A.P.M. at all without Chant's genius.

"What's going on, Black?" he said. "You've got to tell me."

"I don't know that I have to tell you anything."

"Come on, come on. Let's forget the personal issues. I've known Ross Chant for a long time. He's my protégé."

"Fiddlesticks, Scott! You don't own Chant and you never have. Forget him. Get on with your own story."

"Gad, you're a hard man, Black."

"And I'll be harder before I'm through. If you've got a confession to make, start confessing."

Scott glanced round him, afraid that others would hear him or that they had already heard, afraid that this additional humiliation of Black's brusqueness was going to harm him more. He might have wanted to clear his conscience, but he didn't want to destroy the myth of himself entirely.

He dropped his voice and dropped his eyes. "I've made a deal with Gervinus. There's a ship standing by, a hundred and fifty miles west of Fiji. It will appear to be in distress. We were going to its aid, but it's a trap. There's a boarding party ready to take *Arion*. She then would have vanished, apparently from the face of the earth."

Simon couldn't look at Scott; couldn't look at him. He hadn't known what this confession would bring, but he hadn't imagined this.

"But it's not what it seems, believe me, Black. I said it was a bid for glory. I've played along with Gervinus, but I haven't taken a penny of their money. I've played along with them and I was going to play right till the last minute. *Arion* is armed, you know, and I made sure she was armed, just for this. I was going to make mincemeat of Gervinus and expose their corruption to the world."

Simon did look at Scott then, but he would have shown more regard for a rattlesnake. "I've heard some things in my time, Scott; I truly have. But you take the biscuit. Corruption! Brother, what a word!"

Dr Ross Chant was convinced that not a living soul would ever find him. He was bewildered and desperate. He couldn't understand how Simon Black, in a few minutes, had contrived to defeat a plan that had taken months to evolve. But Chant would not be defeated next time. He made certain of that, because his hiding place was the one point remaining to him from which he could control the destiny of *Arion*.

Chant was beneath the bridge, flat on his back, extended in the narrow cavity through which passed all cables, shafts, linkages and communication channels between the controlling officer and the engine-room. Simon Black, at that very

moment, was seated only three feet above Chant's head.

Chant could not remember how much he had told Black and Grant. Those nightmare hours of severe seasickness blanketed his memory like a fog. He couldn't penetrate the fog; couldn't recall how much he had said or how much he had left unsaid. All he knew for certain was that his overwhelming desire to spare their lives had gone. They had become part of *Arion* now. If it were not for them *Arion* would have been destroyed. They had to die with the rest. The knowledge they could take away if they survived would make a mockery of his sacrifice, because *Arion* had proved herself. Chant knew it now. *Arion* was a magnificent vessel, because here she was, airborne, despite every obstacle he had devised to prevent it. Every other warship on the face of the earth was obsolete. *Arion* was supreme.

The only thing that could stop Chant now was lack of the right tools or lack of time. He knew *Arion* had attained a speed far in excess of the estimates, because he had built that power into her for the purpose of destruction. Chant had known it was there, but no one else had realized it—not until the advent of Simon Black. His need to keep Black away from the plans had been far more urgent than Scott's. Scott's need had come from sheer pettiness; but Chant's need had been a matter of life or death. He was still not sure about Black; still didn't know whether the man had seen the plans or not. Chant had done his best to prevent it by following their car, that afternoon, to the Navy Office, but somehow, from somewhere, Chant suspected that Black had got his hands on another copy, and that was the only possible threat to him now. If Black really searched those plans he might realize that this cavity was large enough to hold the body of a man, and that from this cavity *Arion* could be sabotaged. Wires could be cut. Cables could be severed. Linkages could be broken. Shafts could be sawn through. All Chant needed was time; with it he could produce chaos and he could destroy.

Scott was dismayed by Simon's reaction to his confession. In his own mind he had seen the confession as a noble thing. He

had been giving up his chance for glory; wiping off with a few words more than a year of anxious and cunning labour, a year of masterful deceit in which he had blinded the agents of his own government, enslaved the men of his own department, and double-crossed the keen minds of Gervinus—and the men at the head of Gervinus were unscrupulous rogues. To beat them at anything was no mean feat. All this Scott had thrown away and yet he had moved Black only to disgust.

"Don't you see what I'm giving you, Black? I'm giving you my own glory."

Simon turned away again, sickened. After a pause he spoke.

"Mr Scott. You proposed to use twelve million pounds of your country's money and the lives of fifty men to further your own aims. You're not dealing with children, Mr Scott. You might think you've outsmarted Gervinus, but did it ever occur to you that they might be quicker on the draw than you were; that your despicable little plot might have misfired? Any group of men prepared to go this far must be ugly customers. And don't you realize that if you had taken your government into your confidence from the very beginning Gervinus would have been exposed just as effectively and without this frightful risk? You must have met the agent more than once. Conversations could have been recorded; witnesses could have been planted; a dozen things could have been done. That way you would have been serving your country, sir, as well as yourself. You make me sick, Mr Scott. You armed the ship to fight! You're worse than Chant."

"But you are going to fight, aren't you?"

"Fight?" Simon snorted. "Of course I'm not going to fight. I'll divert the ship around them. They'll never see us pass. They'll never know we've gone. Fight! What do you think you are?"

Scott knew what he was all right. He was a fool for having opened his mouth. He knew, too, that if Black wouldn't face Gervinus of his own accord, he would find a way to force him. Scott still had his influence. He was still director of A.P.M., and every officer aboard this ship would dance to

the tune if he called it. Every officer except perhaps Brian Tollis. Tollis had proved to be a surprise. He had turned against Scott some time ago, hadn't gone through with it, but the desire had been there. Mr Tollis would have to be removed. Yes, Mr Tollis would have to go. He might prove to be very dangerous.

Scott moved away from Simon and returned to his seat in solitude at the rear. He wasn't sure what he had hoped from that interview because he had approached it with as much humility as he had felt for years, but Black was a hard man. Too hard for his own good. Scott glanced at Tollis on the radar platform high on his right. He started thinking about Tollis. He started thinking, too, about every other officer on the bridge. They all knew he had been humbled in front of Black. Indeed, he might be struggling to get unstinted loyalty from any of them. Perhaps the time had come to plant in Luff's mind the idea that there was a need to change watch, a need to bring in fresh men to carry on. All must be very tired. Scott smiled then, because all men needed sleep, even Simon Black. The time would come when Black would be unable to carry on, from sheer exhaustion. With Black out of the way, and with fresh men around him, unaware of his loss of face, he might be able to regain control.

He caught his nephew's eye. "Frank!"

Simon dwelt for some time on Scott's extraordinary confession. The Prime Minister, it seemed, had been very close to the mark, although when Simon had read that letter he had found it impossible to believe. The P.M. hadn't been right on everything. He had been wrong about Chant and he had completely missed the real reason for the deal between A.P.M. and Gervinus. That was easy enough to understand, because Scott's motives were the motives of a lunatic. Scott seemed to have no idea of the awful risk. Simon was certain that Scott's bid for glory would have ended in disaster. How odd it was—Scott and Chant both working towards destruction, yet not knowing what was in the mind of the other.

Simon even wondered how Gervinus had hoped to get away with it. No doubt it was a daring plan, but Simon was

amazed that any group of men could go so far, just for greed. Greed for more wealth, more power. No doubt they would have removed *Arion* to some prearranged place, far from the scene of the encounter in mid-Pacific, and there, in some way, disposed of the unfortunate crew and thoroughly examined the ship, gaining all the information they required, and then destroying it or sinking it in very deep water. The Australian Government, shocked by the ship's disappearance, would have written it off as a costly failure, leaving the field wide open for Gervinus to develop the air-cushion ship and sell her in numerous forms on the world market.

Simon could see all that. One did not need to be very bright to examine the known facts and come to that conclusion. But it distressed him that men could be so wicked for no greater profit than money, for any profit at all, or for any reason at all.

"Sir."

Simon turned his head and beside him stood a steward bearing a tray.

"Breakfast, sir. Can you manage it there?"

"Gad," said Simon, "just hand it over and leave the managing to me!"

Alan followed Rex in circles, this way and that, from one deck to another, stem to stern, in and out of cabins and installations, even up to the main armament deck behind the bridge, where twelve huge perspex turrets blistered the top of the hull, and where, too, the great throats of the air intakes which fed the compressors thundered and roared to the passage of a mighty wind.

It seemed that Chant had been everywhere, which was logical enough, but it made things very confusing for poor Rex, who was following the whims of his nose. Rex did his best, but it was not enough. Unfortunately he was not a bloodhound, and twice led Alan to the galley, hopefully wagging his tail. But he had not been drawn by Chant's scent; he had been drawn by the smell of frying sausages. The cook took pity on him and fed him, and thereafter Rex seemed incapable of following any scent at all, or so it seemed to Alan.

He returned persistently to the deserted armament deck. Alan combed it from end to end, and it was a massive place, but there wasn't a corner where a man could hide. Alan inspected every companionway leading into it or out of it, which was the same thing, every ammunition locker, every gun position, and the gunnery officer's command post. He covered that top deck until he could have found his way round it blindfolded, but it seemed that Rex had led him astray. Chant wasn't there, but Rex insisted that he was.

It seemed that Chant must have been on that deck recently, but for some reason or other the dog couldn't hold the scent. Alan was mystified and tremendously anxious, because if this really were a clue he couldn't afford to let it go; yet he could not afford to waste time either. Every minute lost might be the minute in which Chant's mischief could bear fruit. He knew that though some thirty-five other men were examining every inch of the ship Chant was still not found. There had been no message through the address system to stop the search or to abandon it, but Alan couldn't justify in his mind a demand for assistance. Could he rely on a lead given him by a dog which had twice taken him to the kitchen for sausages? Alan didn't think so, and there he made one of the mistakes of his life. He was so very, very near to Chant and didn't know it. He continued to search above floor level but he should have searched at his feet.

The problem of Gervinus bore heavily on Simon. Perhaps he had been a little too short with Scott. By brushing Scott off, Simon had denied to himself knowledge of the precise position in which the decoy ship would be found, the nature of the ship, and the form its mock distress would take. For what hour had this infamous rendezvous been set? For what hour and for what day? Simon had no intention of joining battle with Gervinus, but he was toying with an idea, and that idea was dependent upon many things he did not know. His orders were, "We expect from you the final evidence. . . ."

Evidence. Evidence required witnesses. Yes, it was an idea; but the position given by Scott—a hundred and fifty miles west of Fiji—was about as airy as it could be. The Fiji group

consisted of three hundred and twenty-two islands spread over three degrees of latitude. The position wasn't good enough, yet Simon didn't want to reveal his interest in Scott's proposal by questioning him further. The fact, too, that *Arion* was travelling two and a half times faster than the speed originally planned was going to cut Scott's schedule to ribbons. It was possible that the ship would not have had time to reach the area, unless it had been stationed there for days.

Simon needed the help of a navigator, badly. There were a number of sticky problems that only a navigator could solve for him, but Alan wasn't on the bridge and Simon didn't dare confide in Skinner. Also, he had decided that a signal had to be sent, and that was another job for Alan, the coding of the signal. He couldn't ask the wireless officer because Simon didn't want Gaffney to see the subject matter of the message, and the code to be used was unfamiliar to him anyway.

Simon needed Alan, but Alan was out of reach until Chant was found.

Chant. The thought of the man set Simon's nerves fluttering. What manner of devilry was he up to? This operation was becoming complicated. It truly was. Too much had to be done at once. That meant something was going to be left undone.

"Navigator to Wing Commander Black."

Simon started at the sound of Skinner's voice. "Yes," he said.

"We are clear of the main shipping routes. Prepare to alter course to 318 degrees compass."

"Three-one-eight?" queried Simon. "Where does that put us?"

"On course for Pearl Harbour, sir. We're in the Pacific now. We'll pass to the starboard of New Caledonia at 1230 hours Eastern Australian time and between the New Hebrides and Fiji at approximately 1520."

"Thank you."

Skinner must have been a mind-reader.

"Turning on to 318," said Simon.

"There's one point, sir," said Skinner.

"Yes?"

"Our greatly increased speed puts a different light on the weather report."

"How come? Not that I've seen the weather report, anyway. Steady on 318."

"Simply, sir, Hurricane Gertie was in the vicinity of the Ellice Islands at 2200 hours last night, but was not considered a danger because it would have taken us a considerable time to get there. But now we're getting there in a hurry. We will reach its last reported position at 1730 hours Eastern Australian time."

"Hurricane?"

"Yes, sir."

"Righto. Thanks. That report of yours is ten hours old. Better check with Sydney for its latest position."

"At once, sir."

Hurricane! Simon shrugged. That would make a mess of things, particularly if it had moved south-west towards Fiji.

Simon wasn't quite sure how it came about, but he realized that the picture of the ship's wake, that he was seeing on the television screens had suddenly struck him vividly. It was a magnificent wake, a joy to the eye, a wind-blasted turbulence on the surface, that flashed in the sunlight, snowy-white against the rich blue sea. He realized there was something wrong with that wake—beautiful but wrong. Very, very wrong. Simon had made a most disturbing discovery. The wake was in the air as well as on the sea. It looked like a smoke-screen laid by a flotilla of destroyers.

For *Arion*, in a very subtle way, it was the finish.

Simon smiled, but there wasn't any humour in his expression; none at all.

E P I L O G U E

Copy of cable from Wing Commander Simon Black, D.S.O., D.F.C. and Bar, to the Right Honourable Jeffrey Ames, Prime Minister of Australia.

Pearl Harbour, Sunday.

My Dear Prime Minister,

I wish you could have been with us at the end. There was a profound sense of national pride, national achievement, and national honour. The Americans accorded us the most wonderful reception. It was a proud day for Australia and for the British Commonwealth. I shall never forget it for as long as I live.

We have assembled written, photographic and documentary evidence sufficient to greatly embarrass Gervinus. I find myself wondering how they are going to get out of it. With the story we have to tell added to the record of the unhappy Scott it is certain that Gervinus will pay very dearly in reputation and influence. This is big enough to finish them.

Ross Chant figured in our misfortunes in a peculiar way which I will not commit to paper but will acquaint you with personally when I return. His case and my own regarding Firefly 4 have much in common. It would seem that he has bitterly resented the transformation (by your government) of his "ship of peace" into a "ship of war". It is in this respect, however, that you have erred. *Arion* will never make a warship, but I doubt if this is sufficient reason for you and your government to resign, because *Arion* will make a superb ship of peace. A little diplomacy, my dear Prime Minister, can turn this disappointment to good effect. You will be setting the world a fine example by announcing that this warship which cost you twelve million pounds is to be converted into an express ocean liner of unsurpassed comfort and safety. Disarmament, old boy. Jolly good thing.

Why, you ask? Why will it never make a warship? Once you observe its wake, my dear Prime Minister, when it is airborne at speed, you will question no more. In this present age a warship must have the capacity to achieve surprise. Her wake is like a cloud, visible to the very limits of the human eye. Because of this, Chant is a changed man.

As for Scott, I am still undecided. It will have to be left to you or to a committee of inquiry. His behaviour has been shocking, yet I feel he is not a wholly bad man. However, he is under close arrest and is confined to the ship's brig. The other members of the A.P.M. Division with whom I have come in contact cannot be considered guilty men. Misguided, weak, but not guilty. The fact remains, of course, that *Arion* is a wonderful achievement and these are the men, under Scott, who built it. I leave that thought with you, in Scott's favour.

Apart from an interesting, if harrowing, job of work my colleague Grant and I have gained a little peace of mind in a totally different department. We are particularly proud of the brief but vital role played by Firefly 4 in this operation. We had been convinced that nothing good could come from this aircraft, yet now we find that the psychological effect of its appearance, at the crucial moment, in mid-Pacific, helped to save a great ship and her crew from extinction.

See you on Tuesday.

Regards from Squadron Leader Grant and myself,
Simon Black.